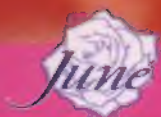


Written by *Raica Sakuragi*

Illustrated by *Katsunori Asanami*

Better Than a Dream

目を閉じて見る夢よりも



Yaoi



Novel

"In here?" the man asked, opening the door to the house. He quickly found the bathroom, and started taking off his clothes right there in the hallway. "Hey!" Yuuki yelled, gaping at him in amazement. "You like looking at naked men or something?" The man smirked.

Tsukada and Yuuki are the perfect couple, living a life of bliss in the shadow of towering Mount Asahidake. While Tsukada is a risk-taking adventurer, homebody Yuuki runs a café called Fuuka. But after Tsukada dies in a tragic avalanche, Yuuki sinks into a dark depression, unable to get his lover out of his mind. An old schoolmate helps him ease the pain, but their relationship is uneasy at best.

One year later, a mysterious stranger walks into Fuuka carrying a mountain-climber's backpack. Kamishiro is a brawny master chef who's looking for a job. Yuuki ends up hiring him, and even throws in room and board.

Soon, they are roommates with separate bedrooms, until one fateful night, when everything changes between them...

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Yuuki thrust his hips forward, demanding even more loving caresses. "You mean you want it here?" Kamishiro smiled, stroking Yuuki's buttocks and thighs. His low, sexy purr made Yuuki break out in goosebumps.

"No!" Yuuki cried out, his loins undulating with increased intensity.

WRITTEN BY

Raica Sakuragi

Birthday: March 4th

Blood Type: B

For me, in many ways, this has become a book of "first times". My first long-haired *uke*. My first *seme* dressed in white. Perhaps a different kind of uniform springs to mind when I mention that? Ah, but he too dresses in white.

ILLUSTRATED BY

Katsumi Asanami

Birthday: November 30th

Blood Type: A

I seem to have this connection with wounded men. You might even call their scars as "medals of honor." That's the impression I'm left with.

Better Than a Dream

目を閉じて見る夢よりも

Written by

RAICA SAKURAGI

Illustrations by

KATSUMI ASANAMI

English translation by

Kelly Quine



Preface

He left the main highway and turned onto a one-lane country road. Its guardrails bore the scars of countless fender-benders, and mottled rust stains blossomed from spots where the paint had been stripped clean.

A bedroom community appeared, dotted with old buildings, but no billboards. The scene looked like a bucolic landscape painting: quaint houses, rolling hills, soaring mountains in the distance.

A mutt snoozing in his doghouse injected a touch of realism, along with the trees wavering in the soft breeze. The dog suddenly poked out his head and pricked up his ears. The bus that traveled this route every few hours was coming down the road.

It swayed back and forth as it approached, but the dog didn't bother to keep looking. The noise had roused him, to be sure, but he knew the bus never stopped here.

But today was different. Had the dog been human, he might have raised a curious eyebrow.

The *whoosh* of compressed air sparked a vague memory in the dog's muddled mind. Back in the old days, his master would get off the bus and give him a small, sweet-smelling treat.

The dog thumped his tail in hopeful anticipation, looking at the exit door. Just as he was about to bark out a welcome, the dog realized that something was amiss.

This man didn't have the same gait as his master, or the same pleasant scent. The dog slumped to the ground and sniffed discontentedly, his tail going limp. As he looked up at the man who was paying his fare, the dog recalled how his master had looked. This human was a complete mismatch, he realized, feeling a little afraid.

Finally, the man exited, rocking the bus with each step down. One of his legs moved normally, while the other limped strangely behind him. The dog turned his head, looking puzzled.

"Is this the—" the man started to say, looking over his shoulder.

But before he could finish the sentence, the bus door coldly slammed shut. The driver simply couldn't be bothered talking to an out-of-towner. Way out here in the sticks, he refused to argue with those type-A personalities from the city who were always complaining about something.

"Damn. I should have asked where the hell I am," the man muttered, scratching his head. The movement caught the dog's attention, and he looked up with glittering black eyes.

"Eh?" the man said.

The dog wagged his tail, fighting the urge to dart back into his doghouse.

"Hey, there."

The dog answered with a polite *wuff*. He was



fourteen years old, and tired of sleeping away the day by himself. Every afternoon, when the neighborhood kids got out of school, the dog would jump to his feet, hoping for a little play to break the boredom. Now the man limped toward him.

Though he was a domesticated animal raised in a sleepy town, the dog hadn't lost all of his canine wariness. The odors assaulting his nose didn't belong to his master, though the human moved in his master's familiar way. Without a doubt, this man found walking to be something of a chore.

"Hey, you," the man said, crouching down to get a better look. The sun streamed over his back and shined in the dog's eyes, making him blink.

"Sorry about that! Pretty bright out today, huh?"

The man stood up again, blocking out the light. It was blazing hot today, but felt quite pleasant in the shade. Any dog would instantly like a human who could commiserate with his lot in life. His tail wagged even faster.

For decades, Hokkaido had enjoyed its reputation as the perfect summer vacation spot. For an old dog like this one, a decade was practically a lifetime.

In this valley, the summers were blazing hot and the winters bitterly cold. When fall arrived, temperatures fell to the freezing point. Few people stayed over the winter in such a demanding locale, but dogs didn't get a vote on where their owners put down stakes.

"I've heard there's a café called Fuuka around here," the man said. "Do you know it? I don't have the address, and haven't seen any signs. No one is around to

ask. Should I barge in on your master to ask directions? Or would that leave the wrong impression?"

The dog barked a response, happy to keep the conversation going.

"Nice work!" the man said appreciatively. "The noise might bring somebody around. Anybody home?"

The dog barked with a certain nuance this time, suggesting he understood the man was asking a question. With a wry smile, the man patted the dog's head. His hand was bigger than the master's and felt even better.

Keeping his hand on the mutt's head, the man scanned his surroundings. The mountains rose boldly above verdant fields, where green foliage swayed in the breeze.

"Lovely," he sighed, gazing at the majestic tableau.

The man put out his hand for the dog to lick. His skin felt rough to the dog's tongue, just like the master's chin at the end of the day. With his other hand, the man raked through his mass of tangled, jet-black hair that seemed at odds with his personality. His strong arms were scattered with scabs and rough patches.

The dog couldn't help but feel superior over this fellow animal. The man obviously had no one looking after him. At least the dog got a good brushing every day, and had even been shampooed the week before.

The fact that the man was not a beast sailed right over the dog's head.

"Good. Somebody's coming," the man said, peering out of his long bangs.

The rabbit had finally been flushed out of the woods. It had been ages since the dog had been hunting,

and he turned around to look.

"At last," the man said, sounding relieved.

The dog lowered his nose and sniffed. The approaching human was an old grandmother who often passed this way. She had never, ever given the dog a treat of any kind.

"Well, then," the man said, nodding at the dog. The mutt instantly sank his teeth into the cuff of the man's tattered jeans.

"Hey, hey, hey," the man laughed, gently poking the dog's nose. The dog whimpered, but didn't let go.

"Oh, well. Looks like she's passing us by anyway. No harm, no foul. You really want to play that much?"

The dog energetically wagged his tail, begging the man not to leave.

"Sorry, but I don't really have time today. Maybe next time?"

"Next time" was a concept much too abstract for a dog to grasp, so the man laughed and crouched down again. His pleasant voice made the dog feel safe, and he opened his jaws.

"Um, excuse me."

The old woman gave them a puzzled look. A stranger rarely showed up in these parts. Was this man some prodigal son who had finally come home? She wracked her brain, trying to figure out who he might be.

"Could you tell me if there's a café called Fuuka around here?" the man asked, breaking into her thoughts.

"Fuuka?"

"A young man runs it."

"Oh! You must mean Sano-san's grandson," the grandmother said, nodding vigorously.

"Yes, yes, that's right."

She looked him up and down. He reminded her of a relative she hadn't seen in ages. Pangs of grief sprung up in the woman's heart, but neither man nor dog could have known she was feeling that way.

"Over there," she said quietly.

"Where?"

The woman jabbed her gnarled finger beyond the doghouse, at a building with white stucco walls covered in ivy. A path to the front door wound up a small hill.

"That's Sano-san's house. They call it Fuuka. A pun, supposedly."

"Hey, thanks!" the man said, bowing politely. As if sharing in the man's joy, the dog happily wagged his tail up and down.

Now the old woman's opinion of the man shifted from "suspicious" to "odd duck." Since the dog wasn't afraid of him, he must not be dangerous. Her natural wariness towards strangers was diminished one tiny iota.

"Sorry, no more time for fun and games today," the man told the dog. "But if I find a job, I'll be back."

The old woman wondered if the stranger was looking to work at the café. She took one last glance at man and beast and noticed the stranger's odd gait as he crossed the deserted road. She made another mental note (bum leg, talks to dogs) and continued on her way, carrying along some nice gossip for her next visit to the

hospital waiting room.

But if the dog could speak, he would have said
"You old biddy. I figured all that out a long time ago."

Chapter 1

The counter of Fuuka had just five stools, while three booths faced the large window. The café was so small, if you took two or three steps in any direction, you would immediately crash into a wall.

The building sat alone in a residential neighborhood at the edge of town. The owner doubled as the chef, and as far as he was concerned, he had more than enough room.

In the light of day, viewed from the back, the crudely-built juncture between the original house and the café was obvious. But once the sun went down, you couldn't really tell.

It was about closing time. Yuuki looked at his last two customers and sighed. Should he tell them it was time to go? He grabbed a tray and got up from his stool in the kitchen.

"Hey, Yuuki-chan! How about putting another parfait on my tab?" a high school girl begged, her face caked with makeup.

"Keep eating at this rate and you'll blow up like a balloon. Let's call it a night instead."

"But it's *sooo* good."

"It's *sooo* good, eh?" Yuuki teased, playfully tapping the girl's forehead with his finger. The girls showed no signs of leaving, but he kept on smiling.

"C'mon, sit down," the other girl said.

"Time to pay your bill," Yuuki firmly replied.

"Oh, don't say that."

They were only sixteen, but batted their eyelashes at him like grown women. Yuuki stifled another sigh and sat down at their table. They had been hanging out there for at least two hours now.

"Your hair is really getting long, Yuuki-chan. Way longer than mine," the first girl said.

"It's a pain to cut it. Easier to let it grow," Yuuki muttered.

"I could braid it for you," she offered.

"Enough already."

She reached out and tried to grab his ponytail, but he ducked away and shook his head.

"Now miss," he scolded, "this isn't a hostess club, you know."

"Oh, gross! Like I don't know that! But your hair is so—"

Suddenly she fell silent, but her face spoke volumes as she looked into his eyes. Was he ever going to get a haircut?

"What?" Yuuki muttered.

"N-nothing," she stammered, turning her attention to the girl sitting next to her.

"My skin's just been awful lately!" she gushed, spraying spit. "Every day I have a new zit."

"Me, too! Do you know anything that works? They say don't put your face on your pillow, but how are you supposed to sleep?"

If you keep pigging out on ice cream, the fat

gonna come out somewhere, Yuuki wanted to say, but he swallowed his words instead.

"It's almost ten. High time you two went home."

"Nah. It's okay."

"No, it's not. It gets pretty dark around here without street lights. Who knows what creeps could be out there."

"Will you come with us then?" the first girl asked.

"I'm busy," Yuuki lied.

The girls shrieked with laughter.

"But you don't have any other customers."

They were absolutely right, but Yuuki furrowed his brows and glared at them. Even after he closed the doors and turned out the lights, he still had lots to do, something these clueless girls would never understand.

He had already taken down the "Open" sign and stowed away the menu board. None of his regulars stuck around past the dinner hour. These high school kids taxed his patience, but since he knew their mothers and grandmothers, he never really complained.

"Hey, I saw your 'Help Wanted' sign outside," one girl said suddenly. "Could I do that? My mom would probably be okay with it."

"I need someone to work days. The school year just started, right?"

"What about after school lets out? I need a part-time job."

"Try the convenience store. They have a sign out, too."

"Meanie!" the girl pouted.

Yuuki narrowed his eyes at her. Not that long ago he'd been in the same boat, wanting to make money to supplement his meager clothing allowance. But these girls needed so much more, what with cell phone bills and cosmetics and a million other things.

The first girl gave him a 500 coin to pay for the 480 yen parfait.

"Keep the change," she said pertly.

"No, thanks," he said with a scowl. It was only twenty yen, but it didn't belong to her. He was trying to tell her not to waste her parents' money, but she didn't get the message.

"You're so cute when you're mad," she laughed. "See you tomorrow."

Pretending that she was leaving under great duress, she glanced back over her shoulder in a rather depressing display of coquettishness.

She didn't stir his blood in the least, not even the tanned arms or ripe thighs that peeked out of her short sailor suit. Her cherubic face nullified the allure of her ripe body. Though there was something cute about her heavy makeup, it only served to remind him of her immaturity.

"So they finally left? How nice of you to baby-sit," said the man sitting at the counter. He looked exasperated as he smoked his cigarette. The bell hanging in the doorway swung back and forth, a lingering reminder of the last customers of the day.

"Hey, Sano, did she actually call you Yuuki chan?"

"Well, I've known her family since her grandmother was alive. When the kids were born, my grandma pitched in to help them out."

The man at the counter furrowed his brows. For some reason, the girls never gave him a passing glance, no matter how many times their paths crossed.

Not to mention their claim that no other customers had been there. How could they miss the big guy sitting at the counter? But they had just laughed. To them, he wasn't a *real* customer.

"A helluva sweet tooth they have. They shouldn't scarf down those parfaits all the time."

At first, Shin only came in once a month. Then once every two weeks. Then every weekend. Now the only days Yuuki didn't see him was when he was away for work.

"They eat them instead of dinner," Yuuki shrugged.

"They call that dinner?"

If you're so concerned with their welfare, why not make a move and see what happens, Yuuki thought, giving his friend a teasing look.

Suddenly their eyes met. Yuuki's heart thumped in an alarming manner, and he quickly averted his gaze.

"Yeah, it's a pain living in the same neighborhood with them. High school girls don't go in for blue-collar fashions anymore. Even you dressed down in jeans and a T-shirt. Man, those were the days."

"Maybe it's that scary look in your eyes, Shin," Yuuki said. But another voice inside him disagreed.

Shin violently stubbed out his cigarette, betraying

his irritation, but still managed to smile.

He hadn't changed one bit since they'd been at school together. Except now he worked at a local construction company, and had exchanged his school uniform for a pair of coveralls. With his shortly cropped hair, suntanned skin, and stormy good looks, Shin was a likeable guy, though sometimes he had a sharp tongue.

Back in school, students and teachers both called him Shin, as did Yuuki. Shin had gotten into the habit of calling Yuuki by his surname, Sano.

Even now, many years later, Yuuki could still relate to Shin as a friend. But whenever their eyes met, Yuuki had to look away. Shin's gaze had become a sharp sword that ripped open old wounds.

"Maybe I should grow my hair out, too. Might improve my standing with the ladies."

"Don't say things like that. It creeps me out."

Yuuki hadn't cut his hair for nearly a year, so it almost reached his shoulders. For simplicity's sake, he tied it back in a ponytail.

But he wasn't growing out his hair to be popular with the ladies, as Shin suggested. In fact, he didn't really know why he had resisted getting it cut. Luckily for Yuuki, his friends never commented on his quasi-effeminate look.

"Maybe I'll just let the top get a little shaggier," Shin said idly. "I'm a long way from becoming one of the beautiful people."

Yuuki knew his friend wasn't being sarcastic, but Shin smiled sheepishly. Once upon a time, he *had* been one of the "beautiful people," or so the girls said. But

they were never really praising his appearance. Instead, they said it in disparaging tones, revenge for all the times he brushed them off.

Yuuki was only average height, but he inherited his mother's delicate bone structure and white skin. Even now, at age twenty-five, he didn't exactly reek of masculinity.

Back in the day, Shin always reminded him that beauty was "skin deep," and complained that Yuuki was too timid. Yuuki looked at the familiar face across the counter.

In some ways, we're the same now as we were then, he thought.

Yuuki remembered their school days, when he used to think Shin was so arrogant. The way he bowed his head as he sipped a juice box, sweat dripping off his face. Shin was on the soccer team and jogged daily around the field. Not only had the female team manager hit on him, but Shin always had some girl at his beck and call.

Once Yuuki had secretly obsessed about Shin's bronze skin and his toned body. But in the seven years since graduation, their friendship had grown into a comfortable thing.

"You've been staying open later than usual, haven't you?" Shin commented. "Why not close up a little sooner?"

"Whatever. It's not like I have something better to do."

"Hey, hey, no need to be such a martyr about it."

Yuuki had inherited Fuuka from his grandparents.

The café did most of its business at lunch and dinner. Since they rolled up the sidewalks pretty early in the country, customers were few and far between after eight o'clock.

After Yuuki took over the place four years ago, high school students started dropping by on their way home from cram school. Before that, his grandparents closed earlier so other neighborhood business owners could gather there for nightly bull sessions.

No one was likely to come knocking once he hung out the "closed" sign, plus the kitchen was clean and out. Feeling grumpy and bored, Shin toyed with his cigarette pack and glanced at Yuuki's face.

She's not here anymore. There's nothing more for you to do, Yuuki wanted to tell him.

But instead he said, "Had enough to eat? I can throw together an appetizer. You look like you're up for a couple of drinks."

"That's okay, I'm full. Mind if I take a bath?"

"No problem."

Yawning, Shin trotted through the kitchen and into the house. In contrast to the way he hooked his thumbs under his belt like an old geezer, the nimble footwork he once displayed on the soccer field was still in working order.

Yuuki watched Shin exit the shop. Then, humming to himself, he locked the front door, stacked dishes and silverware, wiped off tables. After topping off the seasoning shakers, he quickly swept the floor and set the chairs around the tables.

Last, he checked the refrigerator, making a list

for the next morning. Feeling satisfied to be finally done, he glanced at the clock. Ten-thirty.

Yuuki peered out the dark window. During the day he could see the peaks of Mount Asahidake, but at this time of night there was only darkness. Yuuki had to imagine the mountain in his mind's eye.

But such scenery, the sublime work of Mother Nature, didn't appeal to him all that much. This room with a view had a heavy price tag attached, and Yuuki had come to hate it.

"I'm beat," he muttered, walking through the kitchen and into the house.

To his right was a western-style living room. In the old days, his grandparents drank tea there after hours. Back then, Yuuki only worked for them part-time, so they had rarely asked him to join them.

Now Shin had plopped himself down like he owned the place, sprawled on the floor in his underwear. His cheeks were still pink from his bath.

"Put something on or you'll catch cold," Yuuki warned.

"I'm okay. It's the only way to deal with the heat."

With a towel draped around his neck and fanning his face with his hands, Shin looked like he did in high school. He would hit the showers after soccer practice, then wander down the hallways naked from the waist up. The teachers would get steamed and he'd lead them on a merry chase. Yuuki had witnessed his antics on a number of occasions.

"Sano?"

"Eh?" Yuuki said.

He looked over at Shin, who held up a beer.

"Want one?"

"No, that's okay. I'm taking a bath."

Ever since he came here to live after his grandparents moved away, Yuuki still sought a lingering ghost of a man who had once sprawled floor just like Shin.

There were two cans of beer on the coffee table. One was already empty, so Shin must already be second.

Yuuki never slept well with alcohol in his system. He used to drink instead of using sleeping pills, but not anymore. He never felt like he had to drink to keep company. It wasn't that kind of relationship.

He took off his oily apron and ran his pon running his fingers through his fragrant hair. After handling food all day, a wide variety of scents seeped into him, and Yuuki couldn't really relax until he scrubbed them all off.

But washing his hair every night was a pain. Shorter hair would be so much easier, but Yuuki still had no urge to get out the scissors.

"I'll be in Shinoro starting tomorrow," he called out to him. "We keep getting more overtime, might not be able to get back on weekends."

"For how long?"

"Probably a month. Oh, look, you did it again."

"Again?" Yuuki asked, looking puzzled.

Shin tiredly got to his feet and grabbed Yuuki's

arm, knocking him off balance. "Hey, what the—"

"Show me your hand," Shin said, dragging him over to the coffee table.

Yuuki sat down unsteadily as Shin held his chapped hand. Just as Yuuki was about to tell him to let go, Shin softly touched his cheeks, tracing the contours of his face. The unspoken boundaries between them began to dissolve.

Shin was waiting for more than the workday to end. On some level Yuuki knew this, yet worried that it might just be wishful thinking on his part. The psychological ground here was treacherous, and no good would come if he lost his footing, though getting swept away emotionally would be a nice change.

And yet when it came to crossing that wavering line, Yuuki still hesitated.

"You should put something on that," Shin nagged.

"Ah—"

"You're always doing this," Shin muttered, like an obnoxious brother-in-law. He went over to a low cabinet and found a tube of hand cream, squirted some out, and then rubbed it on Yuuki's hand.

"You should do this after you do the dishes," he said. "Then you won't get all chapped."

"Hey, what are you doing? That feels weird," Yuuki giggled, squirming a little, but he didn't resist. Shin's firm touch made Yuuki feel uneasy, so he tried to pretend that they were just fooling around.

Shin's fingers were not that dexterous, but he

deeply worked the cream into Yuuki's cuticles started to feel a bit flushed.

"That feel good?" Shin asked.

"I told you, it feels weird. Enough already taking a bath," Yuuki said. Suddenly he looked at

"What? Out with it."

"I already said."

"Must have missed it."

Their words tumbled together as Yuuki pulled his hand away. He knew how quickly could change when one human being touched another.

"I'm taking a bath. You might as well get out of my sack."

"Nah, I'll wait up. Let's have a drink together."

"If you're still awake."

They used to drink together when Shin was in work. Being in no condition to drive, Shin would stay overnight. Several months ago, he started drinking at Yuuki's place on a regular basis. Now Yuuki made it a point to keep his refrigerator stocked with beer.

He had room to spare, after all. And since he lived alone, there were no family members to call when a friend crashed at his place. And Shin was a friend, of course.

From purely logical standpoint, it was a fair deal that Shin often spent the night, but the truth was the hypothetical truth twined their cords around Yuuki's heart. The term "friend" helped him make sense of it all.

This is the first time I've seen you get emotional like that



Only once had their brotherly relationship been

Don't cry now. Consoling words repeated over and over, expressing themselves with arms wrapped around shoulders, whimpering and weeping to warm lips blotting away the overflowing tears.

What do you say, Yuuki? Just once, to help us get to sleep?

Yuuki had stared at him speechlessly. His face reddened and smiled and said it was a little late. His smiling face not swallowed up words that needed to be said, things might be totally different now. Hachioka nodded and said yes, something might have been what he had lost.

From the bottom of his heart, Yuuki hoped for a stronger embrace, a fierce physical affection that would leave him exhausted and dead to the world. Once indulged, the pampered soul became weak, couldn't surrender himself to the enticing promises of his arms reaching out to him.

Five years before, Yuuki had met a man named Tsukada. Two years after that, they started sleeping together. The next two years had felt like a honeymoon, but Tsukada had died a year ago.

You know, kid, hanging around here feeling being around my mom. On my grandma.

The first time Tsukada stepped inside his house, Yuuki had just turned twenty. Tsukada had been working at convenience stores until his boss finally introduced him to this place.

Thanks to Yuuki's grandmother, native Japanese cuisine was their specialty, and despite the poor location, the food on a away on business made the cafe their second home.

Yuuki had already graduated from high school, but failed to find a good job. He was working as a delivery boy, hand-to-mouth, when he started helping his grandparents. Fuuka had the relaxed atmosphere of a family business, and at first Yuuki pitched in just for the money. Two years later, they finally lured him into the kitchen.

"I have lots of siblings at my house, but I never see my grandparents," Tsukada had told him.

"So why does Fuuka remind you of your mother's?"

"Because that's what I imagine it would be like," Tsukada said happily. His smile looked so carefree, it was hard to believe he was seven years older. Tsukada's baby face and amiable manner were in sharp contrast to his large frame.

"You know, kid, my youngest brother is about your age."

Ever since their first encounter, Tsukada had always called him "kid." And when they hadn't been together for a while, he would come right out and tell Yuuki he missed him, with no shyness whatsoever. At first Yuuki didn't know what to do with a man who was so direct about his feelings, but he was soon swept off his feet by a surge of emotion.

"I dumped my dumb job and got kicked out of my house. My parents are real hard-asses like

that," Tsukada confessed.

During his college years, he'd been *into* with mountain climbing.

"But as soon as I started running the club, vacations were impossible. I finally ended up looking for a career change." Tsukada laughed, scratching his head.

His meager income from his job at a cycling equipment store made it more of an avocation than anything else. But Tsukada had a fierce desire for anything connected with the sport. And when his eyes sparkled like a child's.

"I love the mountains so much that I lost patience with 'normal' life. And this is how I lost it. My store manager is made of the same stuff. It's even working for peanuts."

According to Tsukada, having his income in half was not a big deal. He wasn't cut out to be a salaryman, and Yuuki couldn't even imagine it. In suit. Tsukada's uniform was tattered jeans and a polo shirt, topped by a smock with the store's logo screened in neon colors. He wore it without concern even in sweltering weather.

To a single child like Yuuki, Tsukada seemed as an older brother at first. But soon his odd high school classmates started to seem daft by comparison.

"What a waste!" Tsukada exclaimed, when Yuuki's grandparents decided to close the cafe. "I couldn't they just pass it on Yuuki?"

"But I'm not even half as good a cook as my grandma," Yuuki had protested.

"You can get good. Give yourself a crash course

to get some skills."

Yuuki didn't feel like looking for another job, so when Tsukada spurring him on, he took up the reins and climbed into the saddle. It was Tsukada's idea to keep his grandmother's traditional Japanese menu, and then offer translations to lighter meals like pasta.

"Come on, Tsukada-san! You're just worried you won't have a place to eat."

"No, no, no. That's not it at all!" Tsukada insisted.

For someone who had trouble boiling water, Tsukada definitely had a refined palate. Every night after closing, he would perch on a stool and grade Yuuki's cooking on a scale of perfection and sleep curve.

Going back to his cheap apartment became a chore, so Tsukada ended up spending at least half the week at Tsukada's.

Why don't you sleep at your girlfriend's place? Yuuki asked one day, an innocent question that completely changed their relationship.

Without batting an eye, Tsukada made his sexual orientation quite clear. He also made clear that any advances expressed in his direction would not drive him away. Since Tsukada had been so honest, Yuuki didn't like it, but he had to dance around the subject.

"Why didn't you tell me before?" he asked.

"I might be told, having feelings for a guy my kid's age is a bit, shall we say, complicated."

"What kind of feelings?"

Tsukada said he loved him, but Yuuki couldn't grasp the full impact of those words, having no

experience with romance. In the meantime, they were sleeping together on a regular basis, wrapped in each other's arms. Moaning, at the mercy of his pleasure, Tsukada shed his usual cocky manner. That coaxed Yuuki that Tsukada felt real love and affection for him.

But now no one sat at the counter looking out the view through the window. The year had gone by in a flash. On a clear day, Yuuki could see the snow-capped mountain peaks. Somewhere within that winter tableau, an avalanche had taken Tsukada away from him.

When the first accident reports came in, Tsukada was speechless. It had to be a lie. How could Tsukada be dead?

This past January, he marked the anniversary on his new calendar.

As if I would ever forget the day he died. He thought bitterly to himself.

As the day approached, Yuuki found himself plagued by insomnia. He had gone through the motions in a frenzied haze. Now that he had time to look back, the past weighed heavily upon him.

At closing time on the last day of April, he tore out the page on his calendar and threw it away, under the day he never wanted to think about. He ran his finger over the mark he'd made. That day was coming, then Shin showed up on his way home from work.

"Can you whip up a little something for me?"

"Shin."

Though he was playing the role of a friend, Shin looked more depressed than Yuuki had ever seen

him. Even his voice sounded flat.

"I'll sit here," Shin muttered. He grabbed the stool Yuuki had stowed in back to keep people from sitting at it.

"It's not doing any good there in the kitchen," Shin said, antrobbled by the shadow of the man who had died.

Yuuki set down the chair in Tsukada's favorite spot, at the end of the counter, then sat down.

"That's where"

"I know, but I want to sit here."

The space that had been empty for so long was now filled by his old classmate. Yuuki felt tears welling up in his eyes.

"This is the first time I've seen you get emotional like this."

Shin hurried behind the counter and pulled Yuuki into his arms. Before Yuuki could push him away, the warmth of Shin's touch started to melt his icy heart.

"Why?"

Shin and Tsukada had undoubtedly run into each other once, but Shin had never spoken of it.

"So what, now?" wondered Yuuki, looking at his friend.

"Because we've known each other a long time," Shin said. "When last month rolled around, you still had a smile on your face. Last week your mood definitely turned sour. Now it's scraping rock bottom."

He traced the dark circles under Yuuki's eyes with his fingers.

"You haven't been sleeping," he said. "I'm going

to pop by here every day from now on."

They were old classmates who bickered and fought all the time, and then all of a sudden, it changed. He thumped Yuuki firmly on his shoulder.

"Sano!" he barked.

"Hey, that hurts!" Yuuki chuckled, despite everything.

"Sorry." Shin apologized, wrapping his arms around him. It was the only way he knew how to comfort someone. Like a child, he hugged Yuuki tighter and tighter.

"Shin!" Yuuki called out, stepping out of bed. He pulled his pajamas over his still steaming back.

Shin had promised to wait up, but was snoring on the floor.

"Oh, good grief!" Yuuki said, rolling his eyes.

Since he started working at the crack of dawn, Shin usually nodded off early like this. No matter how many times Yuuki took him to task, his gripes never went in one ear and out the other.

"I keep telling you you'll catch cold. Watch your back, it sink in?" Yuuki muttered, giving him a soft kick.

"Umm," Shin mumbled drowsily.

"Shin," Yuuki repeated, squatting next to him. "Shin."

There was no reaction, which was just what Yuuki needed. He touched Shin's mouth. It seemed like yesterday when Shin's lips had accidentally brushed against his cheek. That moment had been buried in his

thoughts, but he couldn't recall the memory without feeling the regret.

"Sano!"

Flesh touching flesh wasn't that big a deal, except when the person was your friend. But Yuuki wasn't hiding his heart to Shin or to himself. Hiding behind a logical reason, he neither welcomed Shin all the way into his past nor pushed him all the way out. If climbing over that barrier was too painful, he should have just closed the door in the first place.

Yuuki looked at sleeping Shin and sighed. Their relationship went on like this because he didn't want to lose someone he felt at home with, a friend he could talk to about anything.

What would they have done back in high school? What if their relationship had turned down this road before he met Tsukada? What if Shin hadn't been the friend he'd known forever?

But months of trying to ignore the desire, interrupted by unexpected gestures, grew tiring after a while. As Shin became a bigger part of his life, Yuuki's feverish body often whispered sweet nothings to his senses. If he actually listened to his body, that would be a problem. Problem solved. In any case, being this close to Shin and still holding back was sweet torture.

"Shin!"

"Hmmm."

"Wake up and go to bed. I'll get you a futon," Yuuki said, going to the closet. He spread the futon on the floor, not bothering to smooth out the creases. Shin was just a friend, after all.

Chapter 2

Fuuka was set back from the main road and couldn't really advertise that much. It would be hard to reach a more inconvenient location for a restaurant.

The place was originally the home of Yuuki's parents and far from the main shopping district. New customers barely popped up among the regulars, so Yuuki was surprised to see a customer as soon as he opened for business. Usually only the locals came in alone during the odd hours between breakfast and lunch.

"Welcome to Fuuka," Yuuki called out.

The traditional greeting had become a Pavlovian response tied to the bell above the door. Yuuki glanced at the customer. He didn't just come in for directions. He had looked at the clock on the wall and then sat in a booth. Yuuki brought him a glass of water.

"Welcome to Fuuka," he said again, hovering near the table. *Will you be dining alone?* was usually the next question, but he hesitated. Somebody in the neighborhood had probably recommended the place and he'd be coming again soon. Suddenly the bright yellow slipper at the man's feet caught his eye. It was a brand new one, a gift for mountain climbers. Yuuki hadn't noticed when the man entered. Tsukada had owned one just like it.

"Here you go," Yuuki said, setting down a

glass of water with trembling hands.

"You can see this fluorescent yellow eye in the middle of a forest?" Tsukada had once told him in a swamp, no problem."

Remembering Tsukada's cheerful pill gave Yuuki goosebumps.

Slung across his back, the yellow backpack set off by Tsukada's bronzed skin. Because a lighter pack used for day trips, it hadn't been drenched in the avalanche. In Yuuki's memory, it looked like the one at the man's feet. Tsukada's had been left as his parents as a memento.

"Got a menu?"

"What?" Oh, yes," Yuuki said hastily, pulling the menu out from under his arm. His cheeks reddened as the customer didn't seem to notice as he scanned the choices.

The longer Yuuki looked at him, the more he placed this customer seemed. Tsukada was on the Asahidake, so it wasn't unusual for mountain climbers to stop in. But though the man had the backpack, he wore the kind of casual street clothing found at any in the neighborhood.

Even during the summer, the harsh environment of the northern ranges often included freezing temperatures, and no one would attempt an ascent without rain gear. The man's dirty sweatshirt was covered with road dust, and his faded jeans were worn out at the knees. He definitely didn't look like he'd been climbing any mountains, not with those old sneakers, but his backpack was bursting at the seams.

His unshaven face and unkempt hair made him look a little more suspect. He could have been one of the vagabonds who hitchhiked from coast to coast, but he looked over thirty.

There wasn't a car in the parking space out front, so he finished eating; the man would probably want to catch the next bus to the station. Yuuki tried to remember where he put the bus schedule.

"When you've decided, give me a holler," Yuuki said, ready to leave.

"Almost a minute."

"Yes."

Though there weren't all that many items on the menu, it was several pages long.

This guy knows what he wants. Yuuki thought.

"You make the desserts yourself?"

"No. A local bakery does."

"Oh. Well, fine, then."

His first question out of the gate threw Yuuki off his usual stride. The man started ordering dishes off every page, one after another.

"The Japanese-style plum pasta with wild basil."

"Yes."

"The Bolognese pasta with peperoncino. The mushroom risotto. And the hashed beef with rice."

"Y-yes."

The shrimp pilaf. The grated radish hamburger. And the grilled chicken sandwich."

"An am."

It suddenly occurred to Yuuki that the man was

reading off each menu item in order.

"You're not ordering everything on the menu, are you?"

"That's exactly what I'm doing. I want you to cook everything you've got."

Was this guy paying his leg? Or planning to hit him on the bill?

Yuuki was completely stumped. They were sitting exactly in the middle of nowhere, but if a scuffle broke out, no one would come running. On the other hand, maybe he could call the cops from the kitchen.

Yuuki visualized himself standing behind the counter, quietly grabbing a knife so the man wouldn't notice.

As if reading Yuuki's thoughts, the man reached through his backpack. Was he searching for a weapon? Yuuki was about to beat a fast retreat when the man produced a sheaf of ten-thousand yen notes.

"Hey, it's okay. I have money. I won't eat and run. So cook up the whole order. If you don't trust me, I'll pay up front."

"Eh?"

No matter how hearty an appetite this man had, there was no way he could eat his way through this menu at one sitting. Yuuki still didn't understand what was going on up to, but at least he wasn't going to get stifled.

Puzzling this over, he returned to the kitchen. He put a pot of water on to boil. Since he usually worked alone, he was pretty sure he could pull this off. He found his rhythm. He felt the man's eyes burning back all the way to the kitchen.



"Take your time. I'm not in a hurry," the man assured him.

Yuuki hadn't started this business yesterday, yet his customer was already lowering his expectations. Yuuki lightly slapped his burning cheeks and clenched his teeth with determination.

All right. Let's go.

From the refrigerator he took out a pasta container with a scale attached. He always used the scale for the plum pasta, but wanted something thicker for the Bolognese.

In any case, he couldn't cook everything at the same time. He started by dressing the flesh of the fish with green perilla leaf in the style of a chilean salad. The Bolognese was simmered from the start with parmesan cheese to bring out the sweetness of the *minestrone*. He sauteed the sliced garlic in olive oil for the *peperoncino*, then tossed in some slender red peppers giving the appearance of a fireworks display.

"Thanks for waiting."

Carrying three dishes at once, Yuuki suddenly realized he'd forgotten to set out the silverware. The man smirked as he hustled about, but Yuuki had no time to take offense.

As he stir-fried the rice in the same fryer he used to saute the garlic, sweat beaded on his brow. He forgot the mushrooms, and by the time they were prepared, the rice had already turned mushy.

He filled a bowl with white rice and added some meat sauce from a pouch. He only used a prepackaged commercially available product for meat sauce.

stir-fry pilaf. It wasn't cheap, but saved money in the long run for a small operation like Fuuka. He rinsed out the frying pan and used it to fry the hamburger, covering it with a warm glaze.

As he finished the grilled sandwich, Yuuki realized he was panting like a marathon runner. Every minute he handled orders from several customers at the same time. So why was he so tired now? He felt sweat trickling down the back of his neck.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

"Why don't you have a seat?" the man suggested.

A mountain of dishes awaited him in the kitchen. Yuuki's first impulse was to say no, but there was still time before the lunch rush. Stopping to catch his breath, he felt about to fall over. But he bowed to the man's request and sat across from him.

Without a word the man arranged the dishes across the table, seeming to rank them from "best" to "worst." But the man ate so quietly, Yuuki almost felt like pointing.

"Huh," the man would grunt now and then.

"Huh?"

Yuuki's eyes opened wider, fearing that when he distasteful had touched the man's palate. His heart beat faster. The fatigue was fading, but sitting here was not a pleasant experience. He was about to stand up and head back to the kitchen, when the man lifted a piece of food to his mouth.

"When did you slice the lemon?" he asked.

"Lemon? Um, ah, last night."

"And stored it in a plastic container, right?"
 "Y-yes."

"Smells like it. A glass container is better. Lemon should be prepared every morning."

"Yes?"

Though he looked like a homeless man, the man possessed the air of a gourmet. Yuuki gave him the confidence to lash back at him. The way he whittled away at the food on each plate was precise, with a discerning tongue.

He ate almost a third of the pasta and rice, the rice pilaf and hashed beet barely came in contact with his taste buds. Yuuki was sure he must be stupid now, but from the way the guy was gobbling the food, he must still have room down there. No doubt he could detect the ready-made portion of the meal.

The man sniffed the grated radish sauce, the burger. A deep crease appeared between his brows.

"Same frying pan as the risotto, huh?"

"Yes," Yuuki admitted.

"This sauce is Japanese style. The use of olive oil is too intrusive. You should use separate pans."

Whatever, Yuuki thought.

Fuuka just didn't have that many pots and pans. What the hell did this guy expect out here in the suburbs? He was about ask him directly when the man said that Yuuki hire him.

"What?"

"You have a 'Help Wanted' sign out front."

"For a waitress."

Sorry to say this, but your methods are a mess. A careless use of ingredients is amateurish."

"Hey?"

Way was this guy he'd never seen before giving him a lesson. If he hadn't been a customer, he would have kicked him. Yuuki didn't exactly have the means to retaliate. A bill worth several thousand yen. But this guy dropped-kicked civility out the window.

"Thanks, but no thanks. This kind of place doesn't really need a professional chef," Yuuki said.

"What the hell are you?" he wanted to say, taking the guy's attitude down a notch.

But the guy didn't seem to give a damn one way or the other, and slowly got to his feet.

"I'd like to borrow your bath," he said.

"My bath?"

"I'm in no condition to be standing in the kitchen."

"W-wait a minute!"

The man ignored him and quickly threaded his way through the tables. That was when Yuuki noticed that something about him was amiss.

His complete stranger dragged his right foot as he walked. He moved briskly because of his long legs, but his body tilted to the right with every step. A climber who didn't have a ham leg. Did he have an accident on the stairs? Yuuki's heart thumped in his chest.

"In here?" the man asked, opening the door to his house. He found the bathroom and started to take off his shoes right there in the hallway.

"H-heh!" Yuuki yelled, gaping at him in awe. Maybe this guy really was up to no good. A shiver ran down his back and his knees trembled.

"Like I said, I just wanted to borrow the

"You said the bath?"

"You like looking at naked men or some-

Yuuki suddenly realized that the man staring at him was stark naked. Not that there was anything wrong with that, but his cheeks turned bright red.

"You're the one standing here naked!"

"I can't take a bath with my clothes on!"

"You—" Yuuki sputtered. He lunged forward every intent of dragging the guy's sorry ass out of the bathroom door slammed in his face. Yuuki just stood there for a minute, gaping with disbelief. Finally, his circuitry rebooted and he came to his senses at once. 'Police!' He was about to head back to the shop, as the door behind him opened.

"The shower's cold. How do you adjust the temperature?"

"Ah, um, sorry. It's an old water heater. The valve on the right."

"Got it," the man said, slamming the door.

Yuuki slid down the wall until he was sitting on the floor. A damp footprint was on the floor near his right foot. Other long marks streaked across the grain of the hardwood floor, like a snake had slithered down the hallway.

A cold chill swept through Yuuki's body. Scars where the man's torn flesh had been sewn back together had an eerie luster about them. Just

...ended was he? How many side effects did he suffer? Was he still in pain? Yuuki just sat there, ruminating over the possibilities, unable to even stand up.

Shadows wavered through the glass door.

A man from nowhere had taken over his bathroom.

Suddenly Yuuki saw the absurdity of it all.

"Hey, grab me a towel!" the guy barked out the

Yuuki staggered to his feet, fetched a towel from the closet, and handed it over. The man vigorously rubbed himself off, his hair dripping wet. Then he shook his head like a dog, sending water flying everywhere. Without a hint of self-consciousness, he wrapped the towel around his midsection.

"Have you seen some clean underwear around here?" the man said casually.

He wanted to borrow that, too? He must be looking for something. Yuuki compared his willowy frame to the man's muscular physique and frowned. Neither a lender or borrower he—the old saying went. But in for a penny, in for a pound, and now he was along for the ride, no matter how costly the fare might be.

"Oh, never mind. I have some," the man said, pulling some white briefs from his backpack. They were the plain kind, not even high school kids wore them these days. Yuuki couldn't help but smile, but his smile faded when the man pulled out a neatly-folded white smock and slacks.

"Are you a—" Yuuki gasped.

"Huh?"

Only chefs with years of experience wore

uniforms like that. This man must be way more respectable than the grungy creature he appeared to be. As Yuuki wondered what to say now, the man took out a long white cylinder.

"This might not fit, since your kitchen ceiling is so low."

The chef's hat was at least eight inches tall. Though the kitchen ceiling had never been a problem for Yuuki or his grandparents, if this guy put on the hat, it would definitely hit the ceiling fan.

The man wasn't trying to be disagreeable; he still rubbed Yuuki the wrong way. He had sea-sickness half to death by barging into his house, and now his fuss about the hat was pissing Yuuki off.

"So don't wear it then."

"But my head will miss it."

That stupid hat should be the least of your concerns. Yuuki thought, glaring at him. He was about to make a snappy retort, when the man took a bag from his backpack and tied it around his head.

"Well, there's the breaks. This will have to do."

Just like that, his appearance changed. He was no longer a master chef to fry cook.

"I'll be borrowing your kitchen."

"Whatever floats your boat," Yuuki said, shrugging his back.

The man crossed in front of him and headed for the cafe. Yuuki considered leaving him to his devices, but if a customer happened to walk in, he'd be screwed. So he hurried after him.

"Can I borrow a pair of sandals?" the man asked.

"Sure, sure."

The man's tattered sneakers and Yuuki's kitchen sandals were lined up in the genkon between the house and the cafe. The sneakers were caked with dust, but Yuuki's sandals would never fit the man's feet. Yuuki pointed at the sandals in the corner. They seemed to be the only pair of sandals in the house.

"You'll change your mind once you have a chance," the man promised.

"Doesn't matter. I'm still not hiring you," Yuuki said firmly, but inside he was seething with anger.

The intimidating difference in their height made Yuuki feel inadequate. He stared at the man, looking for his faults, but soon grew interested in spite of himself.

"To start with, let's straighten up around here," the man said briskly.

The kitchen was organized around a central island, but it was pretty cramped for a large man. The man muttered to himself as he cleared the decks. It was easy to tell that he had years of experience.

"You don't have a reach-in refrigerator?" he asked innocently.

At least he's not sneering, Yuuki thought. A restaurant with only two regular refrigerators couldn't be that intent to much.

"I'll take this chicken thigh."

"Fine."

"Fresh tomatoes or puree?"

"Here's both, but..."

"Show me."

Yuuki handed the man a cardboard box of

tomatoes. The man grabbed a can of tomato puree, took it from a shelf and studied it carefully, then put on a pot of water to boil.

"These tomatoes look pretty good. It's your mind."

"Not at all."

Yuuki could tell he knew what he was doing simply from the way he steamed the tomatoes. He just held his tongue and watched.

"Have any stock?" the man asked.

"Are bouillon cubes okay?"

His long-suffering sigh made Yuuki want to smack him.

The man lined up olive oil and spices next to the stove and heated the frying pan.

"Would you get the bouillon ready for me?"

At some point, Yuuki had gone from owner to student. As directed, he simmered the bouillon in a small saucepan and waited for his next instructions. The man sliced garlic into the olive oil and gently sautéed it, making sure it didn't burn. He deboned the chicken thigh and dropped it into the pan, then browned it on both sides.

"Can I use this plate?"

"Sure."

The man placed the fricasseed chicken on a white plate, then poured the tomatoes into the pan, quickly cutting them with the spatula.

"Now pour in the bouillon," he directed, turning up the flame.

"Okay."

The man added some salt and pepper, and then poured the sauce over the chicken.

"Time for a taste," he said, grabbing a fork.

He cut a juicy piece from the center, stabbed it with the fork, and held it in front of Yuuki's mouth. For a moment, Yuuki wondered whether he should pluck it off the fork or hold out a plate.

In the end, he simply opened his mouth wide. The man chuckled, but it was too late to worry about the tender meat slipping into his mouth.

"This is delicious," Yuuki gasped.

He could hardly believe that something so good could come from his own kitchen. The rich flavor fairly exploded inside his mouth, a performance that could have been imagined from the price of the ticket.

"Since the tomatoes were fresh, they didn't need sweetening," the man explained.

"I bought those at a neighborhood market this morning."

Yuuki eagerly grabbed a knife and fork and devoured the chicken. Come to think about it, he hadn't bothered with breakfast today.

An empty stomach makes for the sweetest food, but even on a full stomach, this flavor would be unforgettable. Painful as it was to admit, this man definitely knew the chops.

"You like it?"

"Yeah."

"Well, then. Hire me."

"Um..."

His food was definitely delicious, but hiring him

was a tiger of a different stripe. The fact was simply couldn't afford a chet like him, no matter how much moonlighting he did on the side.

"I'm really sorry but—" Yuuki stalled, trying to think of a way to let the guy down easy. Staring at the empty plate, he ran through all the usual excuses in his mind.

Your skills are out of point with this kind of work. You don't belong way out here in the sticks.

Maybe Yuuki could just tickle the man's professional pride. Just as he was about to do so, the man said something completely out of left field.

"I'll work for minimum wage."

"Huh?"

"Just like it says on your sign. Four hours for minimum wage. I'll settle for that."

"Ahh, but—" Yuuki stammered, searching for a reply.

Did the guy even know basic math? Even if he did, it wouldn't work for that piddling amount. As Yuuki scratched his chin, the man grabbed his wrist.

"Sorry," he apologized, but he didn't let go. "Looks like you chew your fingernails."

Yuuki had no such childish habits, but did he look like sticking up for himself just then. The man looked him over.

"The mountain—" he started to say, then closed his mouth.

"The mountain?"

"You can see Mount Asahidake from here, right?"

Of course. He wanted to be where he could see the mountain. Yuuki glanced out the window. The view he'd vanished at night was as clear as day in good weather.

"I can't go climbing with this leg, but I'd like to go close to the mountains."

The one place where Yuuki would never go. The mountains were within his reach and yet forever barred from his touch. He was forced to live that view from one day out.

Gazing vacantly out the window, the man let go of Yuuki's wrist and smiled.

A wave of nostalgia washed over Yuuki, the feelings he had whenever he thought about the mountains.

Isukada's skin had been mottled with dark patches, which he said were only snow burns. Yuuki always sighed whenever he compared his pale arm to Isukada's dark, firm one.

It looks firm to you? You're hardly flabby. Isukada had said.

"But skinny's just skinny. Not the same as being flabby."

"I put on muscle without really trying," Tsukada had teased.

Yuuki's skinny arms had the bare minimum in muscle, and he velped like a girl whenever Isukada pinched an inch of his flesh. Several minutes later, on his back, that velping turned to signs of pleasure.

This man had Isukada's scent about him. He was the same size, the same strength. Bit by bit the splintered

pieces of Yuuki's memories started to fall into place.

"But..."

"Do you have a spare room? If you're worried about giving me minimum wage, you could give me room and board."

Put that way, the money problem disappeared. Yuuki could still say he needed references, though. No one would fault him for giving the heavens a hand. The man who showed up unannounced, sniped at his cook, and took over his bathroom to boot.

The man pulled off the bandanna. His hair stood up in silly-looking spikes.

"That head of yours," Yuuki said, trying not to smile.

"Looks kind of funny?"

Yuuki suddenly burst out laughing, waving his reservations to the wind.

"The house is small, but I do have an extra room," Yuuki admitted.

Right now, he used it for storage. When his grandparents moved in with his parents, they didn't care what he did with it.

"Then we'll call it a deal," the man said broadly. He stuck out his right hand.

"I'm Kamishiro. First name, Kenichi. Here's my resume."

Yuuki read the meticulous *résumé* with amazement. This guy had been a chef for several years.

"There aren't any hotels or *ryokan* around here," Kamishiro explained. "If I didn't find anything today,

...I was prepared to live off the land. Letting me use your house is a real lifesaver."

Anyone who looked as grungy as this guy would have been away for vagrancy. And even though it was winter, the temperature still got down to the low fifties.

Was he foolish—or heroic? He definitely didn't care a damn about how he looked. But Kamishiro still seemed a little on his guard, despite his kicked-back attitude.

"Is that all your luggage?"

"I like to travel light."

Just like Tsukada, this stranger had stepped into the world with a yellow backpack. But how would Shin have known he found out they were living together? The man obviously needed a place to stay. The situation weighed on Yuuki's mind, but he couldn't send him away just yet.

"This would be a good time to rework the menu," Kamishiro suggested.

Dejavu all over again. He and Tsukada had swapped the menu that so obviously displeased Kamishiro. Yuuki didn't answer him at first.

"Is that a no?"

Ah, no, I mean, whatever. If you want to change the menu, go ahead.

If anyone else had suggested it, Yuuki would have been outraged. But if this guy said so, he must know his stuff.

"Your menu is fine. I could pull it off with my current staff," Kamishiro shrugged, seeming to give in.

Yuuki looked at him. He had just hired a star chef and also let him move in. Maybe he should call Shin and let him know about this sudden new events.

As he tried to figure out what to tell him, his expression darkened. Was this really something to toss off in a casual chat on the phone?

"Once I get unpacked, I'll mail the kits, okay with you?"

"Is my cooking really that bad?"

"Let's just say you're not that great."

That evening, he would contact Shin. He and Kamishiro got to know each other, Yuuki stopped thinking about that phone call.

Chapter 3

"How's work going?" Shin was asking over the

phone. Yuuki hadn't heard from him in a while, and he hadn't gotten around to calling him. After Kamishiro had been at the café for two weeks, the phone rang around noon one day, when the shop was crowded with customers.

Shin called because he was bored. No reason in particular, just the same old, same old.

Yuuki could hear loud voices in the background, probably Shin's co-workers. Every now and then, he could hear the click of mah-jongg tiles.

"I'm on a break," Shin explained.

"So you're not just twiddling your thumbs." Yuuki wanted to say, but he didn't feel like joking around.

"Is it raining there? It's cloudy here, but doesn't look like rain," Shin said.

The overcast skies Yuuki could see from the window probably reached across the mountains to Shin's work site, but the rain probably wouldn't make him stop working. Yuuki suddenly felt relieved that Shin was so far away. It was a selfish feeling that made him hate himself.

"Oh, here? Yeah, um, nothing special. Same as usual."

But something must have sounded different. "You catching a cold?" he asked. A chill ran down Yuuki's spine. He should have called. She explained everything, but getting a call from him had pretty much taken the wind out of his sails.

Every time he didn't bring up the subject, it became even harder to say. Yuuki was worried about that, but his tongue felt heavy in his mouth.

"Sorry, I've got customers. Call you later."

Yet nobody cared if he took a per-minute break during business hours. Yuuki glanced at the clock. He saw only friendly faces, nodding in his direction.

The middle-aged man sitting with his granddaughter could probably figure out what was going on, taking to and the nature of their relationship. In his mind, Yuuki didn't feel inclined to talk his business in public.

"Well, see you," he said. A bland farewell. Yuuki dropped his cell phone in his apron pocket.

"Is everything okay?" the middle-aged man asked politely. He was Takai. Tsukada's old boss.

"Nothing that can't wait."

Yuuki apologized for keeping them waiting. Then he set out glasses of water and poured some orange juice for the little girl.

"What's with him?" asked Takai politely. He was Kamishiro.

"Well, ah, I just hired him."

Even when asked point-blank, there was a reason. Yuuki could explain why he'd hired Kamishiro on the spot.

Kamishiro wore the same chef's uniform that

old town Yuuki for a loop that morning, plus a pair of jeans. His head was covered with a bandana, but though he looked presentable, there was stubble on his chin.

He gives off a weird vibe. Like an outcast or something. Takai muttered.

An outcast?"

Takai almost hit the nail on the head, but still came up short somehow. When it came to cooks, outcast was not a word that Yuuki would use to describe Kamishiro, but there was nothing he could do about it now. He cast a glance into the kitchen. Yuuki asked him not to look too fastidious.

At a café like this, where everybody knew everybody, Yuuki knew a big shot chef could intimidate the regulars. And even if he kept a low profile, Kamishiro's size alone would cause a stir.

"So where's he from?" Takai asked. "Forget it, I ask him myself."

Yuuki was too busy to stop him. Takai moved over to the kitchen and interrogated the chef, and then ran back and shared the gossip like a schoolgirl.

Wow. He started off at a hotel in Tokyo. He was here for five years! Then he got transferred to Sapporo five years ago."

Takai was obviously impressed.

What are you saying? Cooks can get transferred, another guy asked.

A hotel chain opened a new branch. He's transferred from Ebetsu, so they shipped him up here without even asking him."

"Shipped him up here? But nice to see you back home, eh?"

Takai ran a outfitting store in the city for mountain climbers. Once a month he came to Hirasaka with his seven year-old granddaughter Yuuki. He always exactly call him a "regular."

Still, he was a customer with whom Hirasaka had deep roots, and the only other person besides Saito who knew about his past with Tsukada.

"Have you decided, Sayaka?" Takai asked the little girl.

"Yeah. What are you having, Grandpa?"

"Hmmm. Maybe the sweet corn pasta with chicken."

"I can't even say that!" Sayaka groaned. "I want to have the chicken fried rice!"

Takai didn't look old enough to even be Yuuki's grandfather. Though his hair had a few silver strands, his small frame and easygoing manner said otherwise. Just the other day, Takai had been whining about being fifty. Yuuki still found it hard to believe.

Considering the youthful industry he was in, the face of an old geezer would send the customers fleeing. Takai had the relaxed tone of a well-seasoned climber. All of his mountain climbing had served to make him look much younger than his years.

"Carbonara and chicken fried rice," Yuuki repeated.

"Yes, but no hurry. I left Hirasaka-san waiting outside of the store."

Though Takai often mentioned him, Yuuki had never met Hirasaka. He had been hired to help

Tsukada. While he was grateful that Takai had been hired, he did not to force them to meet, Yuuki felt guilty that Hirasaka was always stuck minding the store.

Tsukada had once told him that his boss had a bad habit of disappearing at the most inconvenient times. Tsukada had often wondered if Takai was going to claim he was.

Things have picked up since the last time I was here, Takai noted, surprised at the big crowd. He had started working there only two weeks ago, but his reputation had spread like wildfire.

His first week, Yuuki's old friends stopped by in droves, checking out the new guy. The next week they started to bring their friends.

Takai's customer base ballooned like a Ponzi pyramid scheme, one telling two, two telling three. Kim Shiro's talents more than lived up to the hype, and soon people were coming in from out of town.

Thanks for waiting. Here's your avocado pizza.

The customer looked dubiously at the crust topped with deep green dip, topped with pepperoni and mushrooms. He had expected only a few slices of avocado on the pizza.

The dip, known as guacamole, was not familiar to most Japanese, but very popular in the U.S. and Mexico. Yuuki had learned that from Kamishiro.

I started out at a French restaurant. After moving to Sapporo, I became a jack of all trades, from making ramen to pasta to shrimp chili. I even did the traditional New Year's soba. With only your own wits to

fall back on, you can't help straying outside of expertise."

As Kamishiro patiently answered questions, the business about the menu came. The items Kamishiro had added weren't from one cuisine, but were guided by the expectations of the country town.

In particular, he kept to inexpensive items. He chose not to stock up on exotic foodstuffs to use what he could find locally.

The customers who ate there were not adventurous. The emphasis was on family meals that wouldn't cause too much head-scratching. At Yuuki's request, Kamishiro's menu added items acceptable to the middle-aged residents and those that were typical of the region.

With his attention occupied by Takashi, he found himself neglecting his maitre d' duties. Since Kamishiro had started cooking, Yuuki had been the full-time floor manager. Once Yuuki finished with Kamishiro's cooking, he had no desire to complicate his life.

Though his grandparents did their best, Yuuki had never really learned about the finer culinary arts. He would never be in the same league as Kamishiro.

"All right. Here's your chicken fried rice."

"Is this...an egg?" the little girl gasped.

A white egg sat in the center of the cooking. It bobbed barely long enough to peel the shell. It was too hot. Yuuki set down the plate.

"You cut it open and then eat it," he explained.

But it's wobbling," she whined.

Kamishiro handed her a fork, and Sayaka smiled. Though he kept quiet, he projected a tough muscular persona which seemed to scare children. Sayaka's smile was proof of that.

"Itadakimasu!" she cried, poking the egg with the fork.

The soft yellow yolk exploded into the rice. She picked it up with a spoon and took a bite.

"It's wonderful!"

"You like it? That's great, Sayaka."

"Yeah."

"You're going to burst," her grandfather warned, pinching her cheek, but Sayaka kept on smiling. That was the expression people get when eating good food. It was something to behold. The rest of the restaurant noise faded away as Yuuki found himself entranced.

"Excuse me."

"Sorry, sorry."

"Could I get a refill on this coffee?"

"Just a sec."

Though it was past two o'clock, the kitchen was still at full tilt. The original stove, a common home model, hadn't been able to keep up. A few days ago, they replaced it with a five-burner commercial model. It was the end of August, but the temperature still reached the high eighties, and the café was feeling pretty hot. Soon they would have to replace the ancient air conditioner, too.

Since Kamishiro arrived, their expenses had gone up across the board, but Yuuki wasn't worried. Sales had

gone up, too, plus Yuuki felt secure in knowing someone would be with him from opening to closing.

"Kamishiro-san," a voice called out from the back tables. "I'll have a pasta carbonara as well."

"Got it."

Kamishiro plucked out a strand of pasta to test its firmness. The aroma of fresh corn off the cob and the taste buds of other customers. Those who had arrived were drawn to the same item.

Yuuki had worried that the kitchen might be too confining for tall Kamishiro, but by positioning himself in the middle, with the island pushed against the wall, he created an ideal workspace for himself. The space he needed was just a step or two away. "One, two, three!"

"Table three."

Yuuki had never asked Kamishiro why he dragged his right foot. It didn't seem to affect his cooking, after all. The unique cadence of his footsteps couldn't be heard inside the cafe. None of the customers had noticed that there was anything different about him.

"Here we go. One sweet corn pasta carbonara."

"Mmm! Looks as delicious as usual."

Setting his newspaper on the counter, he took a deep whiff. The smell attracted Sakaya's attention.

"Smells good," she said, leaning forward.

"Want to try some?"

"I'm stuffed. Just a bit."

Her happy manner made Yuuki smile. She had grabbed her grandfather's fork and took a bite.

"That's 'just a bit.' hah!" Yuuki teased.

Suddenly, he felt someone's gaze on the side. Kamishiro had stopped working to look at him, but quickly averted his eyes and went back to his pot.

"Excuse me. I'd like to order—"

"Yes. Sorry. I'll be right there!"

Yuuki grabbed his order pad from his pocket and went to the back tables. In a small restaurant like this, a few seconds hardly made a difference, but he needed to take steps anyway.

"So how should I address you as my employer?"

"Boss? President?" Kamishiro asked one day.

"That's a bit of a king guy with attitude to spare actually had to choose."

"President?" Yuuki laughed. "Don't worry about it."

"It's important to make the distinction," Kamishiro only insisted.

While Yuuki had no experience working in a restaurant, seniority ruled the roost in places like that, dragging Kamishiro working in such a strict environment brought a smile to Yuuki's face.

"You don't have to use honorifics with me,"

he told him. "Anyway, Kamishiro-san, you're ten years older than me."

At the point, he signed his paycheck. "You must be paid."

"Respect must be paid? What century was he living in?"

In the end, they settled on a simple "Sano-kun,"

though Kamishiro had a hard time saying it.

"We don't have to," Yuuki said over his shoulder, but Kamishiro stubbornly stuck to his guns. "If you don't, he'd throw in a 'Hey, you!' or 'Yo!'"

But he always meant well, and Yuuki never failed not to laugh. Yuuki didn't care if he just called him by his last name, but Kamishiro never did.

Tsukada had always called him "Yuuki." Even now the sound of his voice angered in Yuuki's chest. His heart pounded just wondering if Kamishiro would ever call him that.

Yet Yuuki doubted it that would ever happen. He and laughed at his own foolishness. Just because he knew Kamishiro? Yuuki couldn't expect a call by first name basis when they barely knew each other.

"Hey, you know something?" Kamishiro called out, gazing lazily out the window.

Yuuki looked over his shoulder and smiled at him.

"What?"

"About time we closed up."

"Yeah. Looks like it."

The hustle and bustle of the dinner rush died off over an hour ago. No more customers were expected on a weeknight like this.

Hiding his smile, so Kamishiro wouldn't see, Yuuki slid off the stool at the counter. To make sure late customers would barge in, he hung out the "Closed" sign and locked the door.

"Want something to eat?" Kamishiro asked.

"I'm not that hungry. Noodles would be fine."

Although Yuuki had offered to cook after hours, the master of the kitchen didn't care to share his secrets. Yuuki never liked eating a heavy meal this late at night and always chose something from their list of specials.

"We have some somen noodles. Boiled? Fried? Cold?"

"Warm is fine."

With respect to Yuuki's physical well being, the two partners had focused on Japanese dishes.

"A man can't live by noodles alone," Kamishiro had said.

Yuuki laughed and replied that a man's digestion would only after age thirty. Even though he was past thirty, Tsukada had still craved deep-fried food. Yuuki had playfully warned him of the dangers of overeating, but Tsukada proved him wrong by dying first.

"We're out of mackerel. The only soup stock I have is bonito."

"That's okay."

Kamishiro had stocked the kitchen with Japanese ingredients, but Yuuki didn't want to be pampered. He knew that kind of thing could lead to misunderstandings. Despite Yuuki's protests to "keep it simple," Kamishiro turned the evening meal into a major event.

"I'll tidy up in here," Yuuki said, starting to wipe the tables.

The kitchen was Kamishiro's castle. Yuuki knew it was a stranger could tell who was the actual owner of the kitchen.

The doorknob rattled, and someone
thru the glass door.

"Hey!"

Yuuki glanced up and saw a familiar face.

"Shin?"

"Another customer?" Kamishiro asked
kitchen.

"Ah, no."

At least a month had passed since
meeting. Yuuki rubbed the back of his neck.
How could he tell Shin about Kamishiro at
He opened the door and forced a smile.

"Welcome back. You should have called
you were coming."

"I just got back from the work
starving."

If things had been normal, Shin would
sat down at the counter. But Shin saw Kamishiro
stopped in the doorway.

"Who's that?"

"Ah, um, this is Kamishiro-san."

It was an awkward introduction. Yuuki
at the sound of his own voice and stumbled
to say.

"A friend?"

"Ah—"

Kamishiro came to the rescue. Despite
never seen Shin before, he flashed him an easy
smile.

"You like somen?" he asked.

"What? Oh, sure—"

"Have a seat. It'll be done in a jiffy."

With his big hands, Kamishiro tossed some dried
into the boiling water. The savory aroma filled
the air.

"Shin, sit down," Yuuki urged.

"Huh. Ah, well—"

"I'm just cleaning up."

They had had this same conversation many times
with one big difference. Now Yuuki didn't ask
Shin to go up his room and wait for him. And who was
cooking in the kitchen?

"Do you like chicken?" Kamishiro asked.

"Um, no," Shin said, nodding his head.

"And honeywort?"

"I like honeywort."

Shin would know that Kamishiro was older
than looking at him. But compared to Kamishiro's
cheerful chatter, Shin's formal replies sounded rather
cute.

"Somen here's yours."

"Thanks."

Kamishiro set two steaming bowls on the
counter. Yuuki ducked into the kitchen to wash his
hands, and then sat down next Shin.

"You said you were hungry. Let's eat."

"Oh, okay."

"Itadakimasu," Shin said quietly.

"Dig in," Kamishiro replied cheerfully.

As he slurped his noodles, Yuuki worried about
bringing up the subject of Kamishiro, but Shin saved
him the trouble.

"Something's funny going on here," Shin pushed away his empty bowl. He lit a cigarette and smirked at Kamishiro.

"I seem to have walked into the wrong place," Shin added. "You think?"

Yuuki's heart skipped a beat.

"Really?" he answered innocently.

"Kamishiro-san, was it? Pleased to meet you. I'm Shin Suzutani. I went to high school with you."

"My name's Kamishiro. I've been working here since last month."

"Since last month?" Shin gasped. "You, who had never bothered to tell him? Yuuki pretended not to notice."

"This sure tastes good," Shin admitted. "So you changed the menu, huh? Is Japanese cuisine your specialty?"

"This actually isn't on the menu, but it's right, the menu has changed. You should stop by for lunch sometime."

"I'll do that. Next week, my work site moved to a national highway project. What do you say?"

"Uh, right."

Now that the ice was broken, Shin talked to himself again. He took a drag on his cigarette and continued chatting with Kamishiro.

"Sano used to make me dinner every week. A week. But nothing like this, I assure you."

"It's all the same to me. Making three is the same as making two."

"Good to hear. Saving on my meal, too."

"I usually wind up at fast food joints."

Shin used to eat dinner here and crash, but that was over a month ago. There was no going back to the old routine. Yuuki quietly stirred his bowl with his chopsticks, unable to speak.

"The sesame oil too strong?" Kamishiro asked.

"Uh? Ah, no. It's fine. A little hot—"

The stove had been turned off in the kitchen. It was almost midnight. Though it was cool outside, the atmosphere inside the café was perfect.

Yuuki looked up and met Kamishiro's steely gaze.

"If you're not feeling okay, go home. I'll finish up here."

"No, I'm okay. You should be hitting the sack, though."

"Don't give me that," Kamishiro grumbled, heading toward the house with a wet hand. His cooking was over for the day. Kamishiro went back to cleaning the kitchen.

"So you live here, too, Kamishiro-san?" Shin asked with surprise.

"Well, I actually sort of invited myself. When I found out that Yuuki had a spare room, I twisted his arm."

"You don't say."

There was a loud sound of water splashing in the sink, but Yuuki could hear Shin light another cigarette.

"Well, thanks for the meal. I'd better be on my way," Shin said, standing up. He stubbed out his cigarette in a slightly vicious manner than Yuuki recalled seeing before.

"Shin, I—" Yuuki started to say.

"Life's looking up for you, eh?" Shin said heartily, grabbing Yuuki's shoulder.

Yuuki's body sank under the weight of Shin's arm. Yuuki sensed that Shin was using him as a crutch to prop up his tottering body.

"I'll come for lunch next time," Shin said.

"You sure have talent."

"Thanks."

"Well, take care, Kamishiro-san," Shin said, walking away.

During his entire visit, Yuuki had never looked directly at Shin even when they were sitting next to each other. Yuuki would have loved to make a comment about his behavior, but he lacked the confidence. He followed Shin to the front door, but had a hard time getting the words out.

"Shin, you can keep stopping by for drinks as long as you like. Really. There's no reason for you to stay at arm's length."

"At arm's length? Don't worry, I'll keep bumming meals off you."

But not crashing at Yuuki's afterward. He said they wouldn't be drinking together. Shin played hard to get, yanked on Yuuki's ponytail.

"You'd better get back there and help your dad. You're getting late."

"Yeah. Good night."

"G'night."

As Shin stumbled into the night, Yuuki had a sudden realization. Shin had finished his "business."

Yamaguchi, and then drove straight to the café. No one noticed he looked exhausted.

Now Yuuki felt even more guilty for not greeting him at the shop. Even if he didn't have anything to say, his rudeness was inexcusable.

Suddenly he heard the sound of squealing tires outside.

"Shin-kun, are you finished with the floor?" Kamishiro asked.

"Yeah, I'm okay here."

"Let's lock up and turn off the lights."

With the lights off, Yuuki could clearly see his reflection in the window. He looked so pathetic right now. Did he look like that when Shin was here?

"How about I go run the bath water?" Yuuki asked.

"Sure." Kamishiro agreed, inspecting the ceiling.

Shin took his hamburgers dripping with sauce, like a little kid. That's what Yuuki would make for him next time.

But Shin didn't show up at Fuuka the next day, the day after.

Chapter 4

The rain had been falling since morning, and the day had been slow all day. After the last two customers left at nine, Yuuki and Kamishiro decided to close early. They were discussing what to do with the bar when they heard the crunch of tires on gravel, followed by the slamming of a car door.

"Good evening!" Shin said, bursting into the bar. The bell over the door shook wildly.

"Shin?"

"Yo!"

He was drunk as a skunk.

"Hey, look. Sano's here!" he said in a slurred voice.

"Hold on there, Shin."

"I had myself a drink or two, and now I need something solid to polish off the evening."

Hardly a drink or two. More like a drink or two. The stench of alcohol wafted from Shin like a heavy cologne.

"Hey, Kamishiro-san. Nice to see you again!" Shin yelled, giving a drunken salute that almost made him over.

Shin hadn't shown up here for days, and this was his second appearance? Thoroughly bewildered, Kamishiro quietly watched from behind the counter.

"Did you drive here, Shin? Yuuki..."

"Of course. How the hell would I...?"
bellowed, turning his glazed eyes on Yuuki.
mouth dropped open. Getting behind him,
sloshed was akin to committing suicide.

"Whoa, Shin, hold on there."

The energy went out of Shin's body like a
marionette with its strings cut. If Kamishiro
caught him from behind, both of them
crashed to the floor.

"Hey, buddy boy! I think something's wrong
with your leg there," Shin chortled.

"Shin!" Yuuki warned.

"That's a good man. I see, I see, I see. Got a bum
leg, eh?"

Shin had drunk himself into a stupor.
small part of his senses remained sharp.

"Shin, that's uncalled for," Yuuki said firmly.

"Sorry. Sorry."

Yuuki had never seen Shin so wasted, and had no
idea what to do next.

"You're in no condition to eat right now. Let's
get you to bed. C'mon, we'll find a place to
crash."

"Sure that's okay with you? Don't want to
my oar in."

"Just stop mouthing off like an idiot."

Yuuki looked up at Kamishiro.

"What do we do with him?" he asked.

Kamishiro said nothing.

Kamishiro-san, I hate to impose, but could you
get him inside?"

"Okay, but he's really drunk," Kamishiro
said. He was acting like he'd never seen the like

before. *he's never worked in a bar, Yuuki*

"Sorry about this, Kamishiro-san, but can you
is that?"

"No, the other way around. I'll lift his top, you
bottom."

Kamishiro stretched out Shin's body on the café
floor.

"He may have a bum leg, but I'm still stronger than
you."

"Oh, sorry."

Kamishiro leaned over Shin's head and began to
lift him. The man under the influence slowly sat up with
his eyes half closed.

"No good, no good. Gotta get up early tomorrow.
Get up and run."

"In that case, we'll call you a taxi."

"Can't go to work without my car."

At this hemming and hawing made Shin sound
like a stubborn child. Yuuki looked at Kamishiro in
frustration.

Kamishiro-san, will you help me get him to the
car?"

"Will you drive him home, then?"

"I can't think of a better plan."

Kamishiro's patient smile seemed to indicate that

he was fed up with the whole situation.

"If he's so hell-bent on going home there on his own accord," he muttered, "let his feet do the work. One step ahead of the others." "Hnnn."

Putting an arm around his shoulders, Kamishiro walked Shin toward the door. Yuuki watched with dismay as Shin tottered unsteadily across the floor at a half crouch. Kamishiro opened the door and stepped outside.

"This is one big car," exclaimed Kamishiro.

The SUV was parked right in front of the entrance, but its high wheel base made it difficult to reach the passenger seat.

"Heave ho!" Kamishiro said, tossing Shin onto the back like a suitcase. Shin raised an awkward leg and toppled over. They arranged his legs on the back seat, a pair of carry-ons.

"Considering his condition, what are you doing making it to work tomorrow?" Kamishiro asked.

"Hard to say."

Yuuki had never seen Shin with a hangover before, then he'd never seen him this drunk before.

"Once I get him home, he'll probably be dead. He was even here."

"Be careful when you close the door," Kamishiro said politely, though Shin was in another world.

Yuuki got into the driver's seat. The key was still in the ignition.

"Will you be okay?"

"Why?"

"Oh, nothing. You just might have a hard time getting this guy up to his apartment," Kamishiro said.

"I'll work it out," Yuuki laughed. "His apartment is on the first floor. I've just got to get him as far as the entrance and then I can call a taxi. Can you grab me ten minutes from the till?"

While Kamishiro returned to the cafe, Yuuki looked back at Shin and sighed. This was all his fault, so he couldn't feel too pissed at his drunk friend.

"Here you go," Kamishiro said, handing him the bill.

"Thanks."

Yuuki stuffed the bill into his jeans pocket. Kamishiro anxiously looked at Yuuki and the drunk friend.

"Take care, then."

"Yeah."

Unlike Yuuki's subcompact, the steering wheel of Shin's SUV was the size of a tree trunk. And if that wasn't bad enough, Yuuki already felt worn out getting Shin into the car. He glared at Shin's reflection in the rearview mirror. His old high school friend was snoring with his mouth wide open. Yuuki grunted and headed for his apartment, twenty minutes away.

Your windshield wipers need replacing. Don't forget to change a ham and get it done," Yuuki muttered.

The early autumn rain snaked across the windshield, obscuring the view. Even though he knew Shin was dead to the world, Yuuki still kept venting. "Where the hell was his apartment, anyway?" He'd

only been there once or twice

"Tastes so good, delicious," Shin said.

"What are you going on about?"

He must still be dreaming about the **thought.**

He would be sure to call him tomorrow. He got sober. Shin owed an apology to Kamishiro. He wondered if he would even remember how he'd behaved. Visualizing the scene, Yuuki started humming to himself.

"Hun." Shin mumbled from the back.

"You awake?"

"What's going on, Sano?"

"Are you that drunk? Don't you remember?"

Shin looked out the window to see where he was and then leaned forward to gape at Yuuki. His eyes were only half-open, but his brain seemed to be working a little better.

"Your place is this way?" Yuuki asked.

"Turn left there. And then right after the next light."

"My chauffeuring services are not cheap, Shin."

By the time Yuuki pulled in front of the building, he had finally gotten used to the steering wheel. He managed to squeeze the big car into the spot, and then turned off the engine.

"Can you walk from here?"

"Hard to say."

"Lpsy daisy," Shin grunted, stumbling out of the car. He immediately collapsed on the wet sidewalk.

"For Pete's sake," Yuuki muttered, getting out.

He held the set of keys up to the street light. "This is the key to your apartment."

"The second-biggest one?"

"Hold on. Let me help you."

Silly.

Just like Kamishiro, Yuuki put his arm around Sano's shoulder to prop up his body. Though Kamishiro had done it with a minimum of effort, lifting the second-biggest weight made Yuuki grimace.

"Can't you move your legs on your own here?"

"No. They won't listen to a thing I say to them," Sano grined. The upper half of his body was as rubbery as the lower half.

Yuuki unlocked the door and found the light switch. He turned it on and saw the cluttered studio and Sano's attempt at a futon.

"Your futon is already laid out, so you can hit the sack."

"Yeah."

"Well, I've got to get going."

As things stood now, Shin should at least remember what to do now. Yuuki decided against pulling a practical joke he'd been mulling over, and found himself feeling a little disappointed. Shin stumbled out.

"Careful now!" Yuuki gasped.

"Ouch! That hurt!" Shin cried out. He must have banged his knees on the hardwood floor.

"Yeah, your legs are useless."

"My bad."

"You just can't go drinking yourself into this state."

As exasperated as he felt, Yuuki abandoned Shin, so he kicked off his shoes and stepped inside. He leaned over Shin's back and pulled him around his waist.

"You're too heavy! Can't you get up?"

"I'm trying, I'm trying," Shin protested, and he began to giggle.

Every time he tried to stand, he fell flat on his face, but Yuuki wouldn't even try to carry him.

"Fine. Crawl there, then."

"I'm trying, I'm trying."

"Son of a bitch!" Yuuki snapped, venting his frustration on his forehead. But then he started to laugh.

By the time Shin dragged his body to the mat, Yuuki felt the awkward atmosphere between them had been cleanly swept away.

"You want some water?"

"Thanks."

Yuuki filled a cup left in the sink, then handed it down and handed it to Shin, who drained the cup in a couple of gulps. He looked like any ordinary person now.

"Oh, by the way, can you catch a taxi for me here?"

"If you don't call first, they won't come."

"I didn't bring my phone. Can you make the call?" Yuuki asked with a smile.

Just then he noticed that Shin's eyes, bleary with alcohol, were looking straight at him.

"Hey, spend the night. I'll drive you home tomorrow."

"You have to get to the work in the morning. Or you'll forget."

"I was kidding."

He was what? Yuuki's smile froze on his face as he was speaking somewhat laconically for a man who was heavily pickled in alcohol.

"I have to stock up on supplies tomorrow," Yuuki said.

"We'll leave early."

"I'd better not tell Kamishiro-san that I'd be staying."

He

But before Yuuki could finish the sentence, Shin pounced and put his hand over Yuuki's mouth.

"Shin!" Yuuki cried out in a muffled voice. What was going on now? Even though Shin was not breathing, Yuuki could still smell booze.

"Did you forget all about Tsukada-san?" Shin asked sadly, taking his hand away. But Yuuki found himself unable to answer.

"Shin," he muttered.

"You did forget! Have you told that guy about him? Funny how you didn't tell me."

"Shin!" Yuuki wailed.

Suddenly Shin leaned over and kissed Yuuki, who was too shocked to resist.

"Shin!"

Shin straddled his body, forcing him down. His ponytail got caught in the fray, making him

"Sano, Sano," Shin moaned over and over again, devouring Yuuki's mouth.

"No, no," Yuuki pleaded.

Shin sucked hard on Yuuki's lower lip, forcing his tongue into his mouth. A wave of pleasure ran down Yuuki's spine as his face twisted. This wasn't supposed to happen. This didn't **should be stopped, no questions asked.**

But the pleasure only intensified. Yuuki began to expand from the inside out. The man Shin sought out the tender flesh in his mouth. Yuuki's heart raced so hard he thought it might rupture, pressing against his ribcage.

As Shin grabbed his ass and kneaded his buttocks, Yuuki's hips began to sway. He **starved for it, too.** He hadn't been with a woman so long, sex was only a distant memory. But **didn't mean he would give in.**

"No, Shin. We can't," Yuuki protested, **his mouth away with great effort.**

But Shin just moved to Yuuki's neck, **trailing across his skin.** Yuuki felt a sense of **and needles in the soft place inside his throat.**

He wanted it. He truly wanted it. But **passion warred inside him.** He arched his back, **gazed at a ceiling lamp, but the light looked distorted.** His reason was as confused as his **vision.**

Begging and pleading would make **Even if he could resist Shin, his body still** **Shin had definitely noticed.** He pulled down **shirt and nibbled at his collarbone.**

"Ow!" Yuuki gasped, shrinking from the pressure.

Shin dove his hand under Yuuki's shirt and **pressed his chest.**

Shin. Yuuki shrieked. But Shin just slapped his **Yuuki couldn't believe that Shin would raise his** **against him.**

Contrary to his rough-hewn exterior, Shin was **at school.** Sometimes he'd blow off steam after **that he'd never actually punched anybody.** Back **Shin would often take the blame when** **hands messed up the AV room, even when it wasn't**

More than the shock of being struck, Yuuki was **more devastated that Shin had been repressing so** **against him.**

"Shin. No." **He thought that his kind-hearted friend might be** **in apology, blaming alcohol for his lack** **But what oozed from Shin's clenched teeth** **demerol.**

"I always wanted to do this," he said. "But I **it was a lost cause.** "Every time I pretended to **sleep and you came over to touch me, my heart beat** **I should have made a move, but I wanted to** **you got over Tsukada-san. But you never said**

"Shin, I know..." **Then why? What's with that bastard**

Yuuki looked at Shin with surprise. Were his **shot bloodshot or was he crying?**

"You been sleeping with him?"

"No, I haven't."

"Don't lie. Why didn't you tell me about this then?"

Even when he was drunk, Shin didn't know how to push his buttons.

"Prove it. Prove you never slept with anyone," he muttered. His left arm wrapped around Yuuki's waist.

How am I supposed to do that? Yuuki wondered.

Shin pulled him closer.

"Sano, Sano," Shin said softly. Yuuki's name. Yuuki's heart felt like it was breaking. Shin's hands stroked his body.

"Ahh..." he moaned, feeling a tingle spread across his bare chest. His jaw trembled. Yuuki stopped himself from gasping aloud. Maybe he could just forget that this was Shin. Then it would be okay. But Yuuki couldn't forget. Those hands that he couldn't belong to anyone but his old friend.

"That hurts," Yuuki grimaced as Shin nipped at his nipple.

Shin's hands moved lower. Suddenly he lay down and put his mouth around Yuuki's penis.

Yuuki's toes curled as they always did when he felt turned on. Those memories were still with him. Staring blankly at the ceiling, he crawled back into the memories of the past. But though Shin was sucking frantically, Yuuki's member didn't respond.

"Shit!" Shin snapped, roughly pulling Yuuki's legs apart.

Yuuki was too tired to resist. Lifting Yuuki's



saliva-drenched testicles. Shin wiggled his cock into his hole, then ferociously moved it in and out.

"Hah!" Yuuki gasped in pain. He groaned, his body shaking together, stifling a cry, then shut his eyes and turned his face away. He didn't want to look at Shin, but he was scouring the inner parts of his soul.

The rude movements of Shin's cock made Yuuki wince, but he tried to block out the pain. The strain chilled his feet and hands as he pulled his clenched teeth. Shin's finger kept on ripping at his skin.

"No good..." Yuuki moaned.

"Eh?"

Something suddenly brushed against his stomach. Yuuki cautiously opened his eyes, but Shin was holding him around his waist, his head buried in his chest. No matter how comical the scene may have looked to a casual observer, no one was laughing.

"What's the point if you're going to look at this?" Shin said tiredly.

Yuuki had nothing to say back to him.

"Go home," Shin said in a small voice. He sat on the futon, clasping his knees to his chest. Yuuki didn't respond, and headed for the door.

The streets were empty at this time of night. Yuuki trudged along, the rain soaking him to the bone. He finally arrived at a main thoroughfare and saw a line of headlights, but the first two taxis sped past him.

"They probably add an extra charge for extra passengers," Yuuki muttered. "Shin owes me a ride home."

The odds of that happening were pretty low, yet he kept on muttering to himself as he walked along. He managed to convince a suspicious driver to take him home, and made it home a hour later.

"Sorry for all the trouble," he apologized to the driver. He went inside and took ten thousand from the wallet. The driver then came out and tipped the man another ten thousand. He hoped that would be enough to clean his car. Yuuki wasn't in the mood to get into a fight.

Kamishiro would have hit the sack hours ago. He made as little noise as possible, Yuuki headed for his bedroom.

If Kamishiro woke up, Yuuki didn't know how to explain it. He looked like a drowned rat. He wanted to get rid of any evidence of being with Shin.

His wet clothes clung stubbornly to his body. He was growing more irritated by the minute. The memory of Shin's kiss came back to him. His skin quivered.

"Damn!" As he yanked his T-shirt over his head, the clothed against his neck. He was too scared to look at his reflection right now. Who knows what he'd find? The brushing against his raw nipples made him shiver. Hot water would only make it worse. He thought alone made his hand tremble on the sink.

Yuuki firmly touched his nipples with just his fingers. They were hot and swollen and stained with blood. He clenched his teeth and cleansed the throbbing

wounds. Just then he heard the door open and Yuuki jumped with surprise.

"You're back!"

"Kamishiro-san."

Kamishiro stood in the bathroom wearing only sweatpants. Yuuki should have known Kamishiro would wait up for him. He had been worrying about him all night.

Yuuki felt touched by Kamishiro's concern, but he was also mortified. How long had he been sleeping? Did Kamishiro hear him moan when he touched his nipples? Yuuki's cheeks blushed scarlet.

"What's that?"

"Umm..."

"There."

Yuuki thought he must be wondering why he was fondling his own chest, but Kamishiro was looking at Yuuki's throat.

"Hey!" Kamishiro said suddenly. Yuuki ran to the bathroom. Yuuki shrank back, but he didn't want to hide.

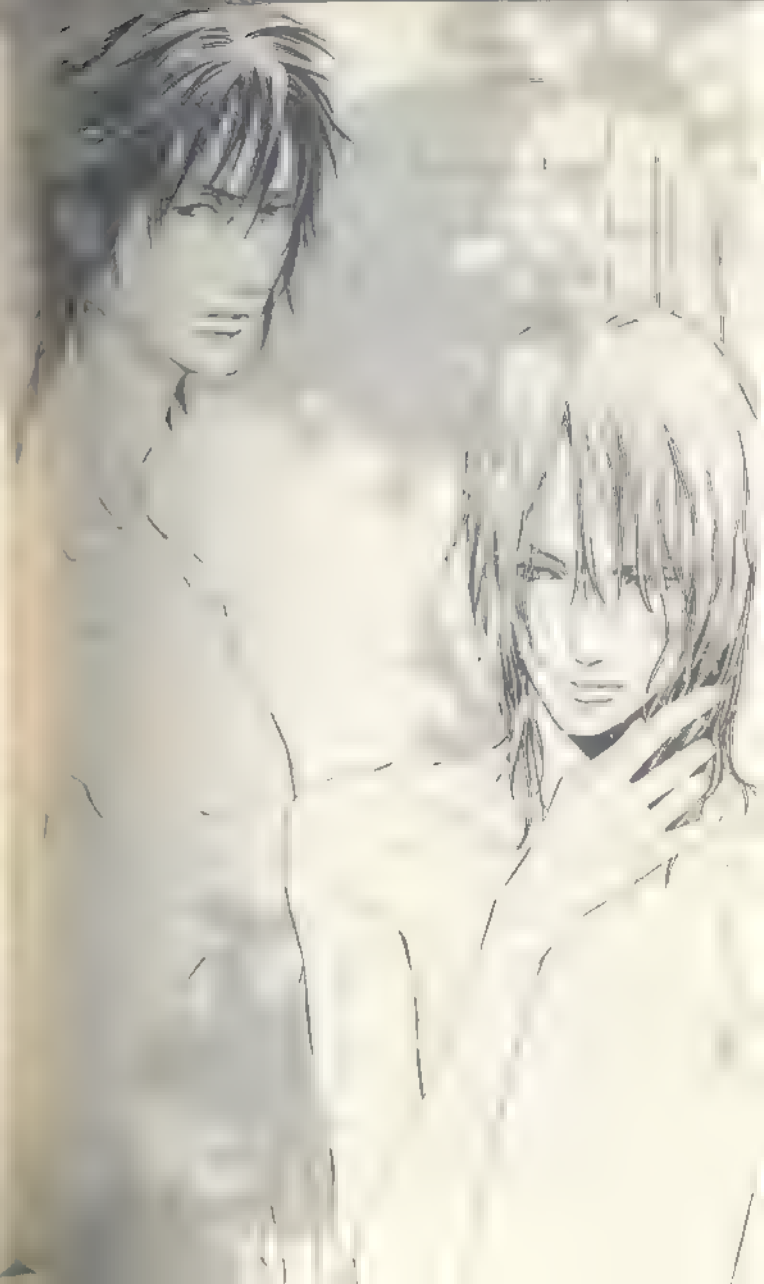
"What is this? Was it him?"

"It's...nothing."

For such a big guy, Kamishiro showed a lot of remarkable dexterity. Yuuki shivered as Kamishiro touched the back of his neck.

"Is this a hickey?" Kamishiro asked. Yuuki was confused.

His fingers gently stroked the same spot on Yuuki's neck. A sensual heat began to bloom in Yuuki's body, just because he was feeling stressed-out.



"You're bleeding!" Kamishiro gasped

He pushed away Yuuki's hand from his nipple. Yuuki didn't think he was that far from bleeding, but about blood only amplified the pain.

"You're freezing. Get yourself warm. When you get out, I'll tend to your wounds," he said firmly.

"I'm okay."

"You're not okay!" Kamishiro snapped. Yuuki swallowed hard.

The glint in Kamishiro's eyes when he touched him were both higher and lower. Yuuki had a sudden desire to leap into his arms.

"It really is nothing," Yuuki insisted. Kamishiro's eyes. "He was just horny for me. He made him mean. He gave me a few scratches. That kind of behavior is pretty rare for him."

This has nothing to do with you, Yuuki. Just say. Just don't get involved, okay?

Did Kamishiro get the message? Or was he making fun of him? Yuuki's throat tightened, and his mouth felt paper dry.

"Oh. Is that so?" Kamishiro finally said.

Kamishiro's eyes reflected the same sickly anger that Shin's had. Yuuki felt guilty to be the one responsible for their pain.

"Good night."

Yuuki brushed past Kamishiro and disappeared into the bathroom. As he stepped on the white bath mat, he trembled. The heat he felt from Kamishiro's feet touch consumed Yuuki with an almost insatiable desire.

He told himself not to turn around.

"Sano-kun," Kamishiro muttered.

What?

Is he your lover?"

If he denied it, Kamishiro would think that Shin was lying. The marks on his body certainly suggested so. If Yuuki said yes, he would be betraying Shin. He didn't know their complicated history, and he had no desire to share it with him. Or rather, he couldn't.

No, just a friend."

In that case, what's this all about?"

This? This is about sex, not affection."

Was Kamishiro sane that much of a goody two-shoes that he never heard of gay sex? Maybe doing it with him had never actually occurred to him.

But there's nothing like that going on with him, is there?" Yuuki went on. "Just call it a break-up."

But they certainly weren't breaking up as lovers. Probably not even as friends.

Is that so?" Kamishiro said.

Don't be so damned understanding! Yuuki fumed inside.

The way Kamishiro took everything at face value was getting on his nerves. Yuuki was dying to lash out, but clenched his fists instead.

If you say so."

I say so. That's why it has nothing to do with me. I'm off to bed now. I have to get up early tomorrow."

"Well, good night, then."

"Good night," Yuuki answered, without looking around. He had no willpower left to resist her gaze.



Chapter 5

"I'm hiking Asahidake again," Tsukada

said. Again. Takai asked, looking surprised.

"A group from Sapporo needs an experienced guide to go with them."

Tsukada had been a mountain climbing fanatic since college. But Takai thought Tsukada had gotten a little rocky after his second ascent of Asahidake.

Yuuki sighed. When it came to the mountains, Tsukada abandoned him without a second thought, or so he believed.

"It will only be for a couple of days," Tsukada said to him.

But that "couple of days" had stretched into an entire month.

"When are you leaving?" Yuuki had asked him.

"The second of next month. Golden Week is the time people can get off from work."

Spring came late to the northern latitudes of Hokkaido, but by May the cherry blossoms would be in full bloom. The temperature would climb and the winter snow that covered the paths would have melted by then.

But last year was different. According to Takai, it was a "white winter on the peaks," even in May. Though the

mountain was only a modest seventy-five hundred feet in elevation, it shared the same weathered stone as a ten thousand foot peak further south.

"Hey, after you get back, let's take a walk and go somewhere," Yuuki had suggested. Tsukada shook his head.

"I can't. I'm already taking my share of the hike."

"You mean you're not doing it for the money?"
"It's a freelance job. My old boss gave me a favor for some friends of his."

Tsukada also participated in expeditions as a regular at Takan's store, and usually took a break before and after. Yuuki's face fell.

"Sorry," Tsukada said softly, but he didn't offer help.

Yuuki sullenly turned his back, and pulled his shoulders and pulled him close.

Later, lying in bed together, Yuuki, the spoiled child, while Tsukada covered him with a blanket. Minutes later, all was forgiven.

"Come climbing with me!" Tsukada asked.
"Perish the thought," Yuuki scoffed.
"Really? It's a lot of fun."
"More fun than this?" Yuuki teased.
Tsukada's hips.

In retaliation, Tsukada quickly penetrated Yuuki's hole with his finger. A torrent of sensation flooded Yuuki with a burning hot intensity.

"No... ahhn... please..." he moaned.
"Should I stop?"

"I didn't say that."

After his grandparents moved away, the house seemed very small and lonely. Tsukada slept over there a week, but when Yuuki asked him to come, Tsukada laughed.

"If I did that, you'd be a wreck."
"We could do it every night if we were..."

"...try? In that case, count me in!"
"You, big dummy!"

Yuuki wanted to fall asleep in Tsukada's embrace, but he did wind up doing it every night. Even if he ended up breaking into little pieces, Yuuki's body possessed the memory of being held in those strong arms.

"Hey! Wanna bet how many times you can do it?" Yuuki proposed.

"You? Or me?" Tsukada asked with a smile.
"Tsukada-san, of course."

"Idiot. Not a fair challenge for a thirty-something man."
"But this hardly seems like the body of a thirty-something man!"

During his hand under the covers, Yuuki took notice of Tsukada's swelling erection. Tsukada grimaced, and it steeled his nerves. He was too cute for words.

So their last conversation was about how many times he could come. Yuuki's dreams always turned into nightmares filled with deep regret.

Tsukada-kun was buried under an avalanche of Tsukada's call came as Yuuki was closing for the night.

the night. A chill raced down his spine. He still remembered. He peered out into the darkness, but saw nothing but despair. The rescue team had even climbed up the mountain until morning. Tsukada had to spend the night under the snow.

"Takai-san, you must be mistaken!"

"There was an avalanche near here. The rest of the expedition returned just in time. Tsukada-kun..."

"This can't be true." Yuuki said over and over again. "This can't be true." He had nothing else to say. The last few days, Yuuki was acting strangely. They called it **he didn't reply.**

Yuuki thought about what he had done that noon that day. Smiling at his captives, giving them food. Playing straight man to their jokes. When Tsukada was being buried by an avalanche, Yuuki was so happy-go-lucky. Suddenly he felt guilty.

"It's a lie!" he cried out.

Why didn't they tell him earlier? He was screaming at Takai, who didn't deserve to be punished. The words fell from Yuuki's hands, crashing into the snow. **register.**

The harsh sound yanked Yuuki out of his nightmare.

"A lie."

Over and over his lips formed the word for his nightmare. He stared up at the ceiling, unable to move.

He went away and he could relax.

Tsukada-san..."

In his dreams, in this bed, Tsukada had held him. Now that **he was alone**, Yuuki didn't know what to do with himself.

Ah...

The fires that burned in his dreams still glowed. He could hardly stand even thinking about Tsukada. Recalling his gentle caresses, Yuuki's hand slipped under the sheets and found his own body instead.

As his hand crept under his pyjama top, Yuuki remembered Tsukada's laughing face whenever he **played with his breasts.**

"Feels like a super triple A cup," Tsukada teased him as he coarsely caressed through Yuuki's gown, filling him with desire.

"You like this, eh?" Tsukada whispered.

Ah...

When Tsukada touched his nipples, Yuuki would melt back to him. They would cuddle like two spoons. Over and over, and Kamishiro always whispered in his ear.

"Now don't run away from me."

"Tsukada-san!"

Thinking himself only left Yuuki feeling lonely, but he still continued. Now he was stroking his wrist brushed against the tip of his penis, making his body shudder.

Ah... he moaned, though the sensation was not satisfying. Suddenly Yuuki called out for his name.

"Tsukada-san...touch me there..

"Here?" Tsukada would ask.

"No, there..."

Remembering Tsukada's touch, Yuuki stroked his own cock. The only time Tsukada's touch felt like a massage with grace was when he was stroking Yuuki's cock.

"How can...you do that..."

"I know all the places that make you feel good."

Yuuki worked the tip of his rod against the sensitive skin of his hips as his hips thrust forward uncontrollably.

"Ahh...ahh...ahh..."

"You're coming, Yuuki. You're coming..."

Now Yuuki could almost believe that Tsukada was whispering in his ear. He responded with a moan and got lost in his own fantasy world.

He remembered how Tsukada's hands covered him like a warm blanket. How his hands felt like a massage with muscle. How his skin glistened with sweat when he was in the shower.

"Ahh..."

All of a sudden, the fantasy changed. The image of Tsukada's naked body turned into Kamishiro's naked body.

You like looking at naked men?

That's right, Yuuki confessed in his head. He had purred when I saw you.

As Yuuki visualized Kamishiro's body, his body throbbed.

Suddenly, it was all over. Yuuki closed his eyes and laughed at himself. What an idiot he was. He had been so close to how long he had abstained from sex. He was so close.

...in a way he'd just met.

But he still could dream, couldn't he?

"Hah...hah...hah..."

Yuuki could feel his heart beat, and pinched the skin on his chest. His whole body trembled as he started inside his shorts.

"Ahhhhhhhhhh..."

His lips parted in a faint smile for a moment, but he quickly pressed them together and closed his eyes.

He was alone.

"I'm back," Yuuki said, hauling in groceries.

Today he went to the local supermarket for supplies, but he was about to disclose this to his curious customers.

He transferred his purchases to a plain cardboard box and wanted them to think their ingredients came from some exotic source.

But today Yuuki wasn't in the mood to keep up his act. He tugged in bags with the store logo right into his bag.

"Hey, about time," Takai said. He was sitting at the counter.

"Welcome," Yuuki said, but he had a funny feeling that something was up.

Business usually dropped off around two o'clock, but today it was a lunch rush. Later, high school students often came by for a snack on their way home. Kamishiro had sent Yuuki to the store while they had a breather.

"Don't we have enough to last us until tomorrow morning?" Yuuki had protested. He was by a head. Kamishiro had rolled his eyes.

"Enough with the sighing. You're giving everybody the blues."

Ever since that night at Shin's apartment, Yuuki had been sighing throughout the day. He was worried that Kamishiro-san hadn't noticed that Shin had hurt him in a drunken fit.

"While you're at it, get something to eat," Kamishiro directed.

"Like what?"

"I'd say something you'd like to eat," Kamishiro just tell me you're not hungry. It didn't matter. "How about gazpacho? Cold soup. It's easy to eat down easy, even when you don't have a lot of energy."

"Gazpacho, huh?"

"Just buy whatever you like," Kamishiro said soothingly, like a parent patting a child's head. Yuuki was a boy.

Whatever, Yuuki thought. It was true, he didn't have much appetite lately. But he was really starting to hate how Kamishiro kept looking at him with sympathy.

"Well, I'm off," Yuuki said.

"See you."

He drove to the neighborhood supermarket. Except for the fresh produce he got at the nearby farmer's market, everything else they needed was available nearby.

Yuuki looked at Kamishiro's messy, dashed-off

It looked like something you would give the kid to keep him occupied. Was the chef just doing something to do? And why did Kamishiro seem so worried about him? It wasn't like Yuuki was doing anything strange or anything.

"Stirred red wine vinegar, condensed milk..." Kamishiro said to himself.

He had to be told, Yuuki had been pretty spaced out that night at Shin's. Just that morning, he had dropped three plates while doing the dishes. No wonder Kamishiro was concerned.

A small part of Yuuki actually wanted to kick up a fuss, but a louder voice in his head told him to just let it go. He peered up through the windshield at the overcast sky. Even if he didn't feel like it, he would put on a brave face when he got back to the cafe.

"Looks like rain," Yuuki said innocently.

Kamishiro only smiled. Something told Yuuki that he had just been talking about him. Maybe Kamishiro had brought up the stuff about Shin. In turn, Kamishiro had probably filled in the chef about Yuuki and Shin's relationship.

"Out shopping, huh?" Takai asked casually.

"Yeah, some things got broken," Kamishiro said. That filled Yuuki's heart with more poison.

"Here for lunch, Takai-san?"

"Nah, just a break. Some coffee might hit the spot."

Takai rarely stopped by in the afternoon without

his granddaughter in tow. Had Kamishiro asked him to come over? Yuuki's imagination was now running completely wild.

"Shall I make a pot?" Kamishiro offered.

"I should really be going," Takai said. "I have a cup to go."

Fuka wasn't known as a specialist chef, but their house roast wasn't half bad. He, who never cooked himself, insisted that he keep serving good coffee after he inherited the place.

Yuuki forced himself to smile at Takai and went out the door. Now that the place was empty, he was loose with both barrels.

"What did Takai-san want to see me about?" Yuuki asked pointedly.

"Nothing. He was in the neighborhood and happened to drop by."

"Oh, really?"

He and Kamishiro stuck to the same old expressions frozen on their faces. Having nothing to say, Yuuki turned his back and grimaced. He shivered a chill as soon as he walked in, and not because of the air conditioning.

Kamishiro peered into the grocery bags and handed out the condensed milk. Yuuki had wondered why he wanted it, but didn't bother to ask.

"So, what do you want to eat today?" Kamishiro asked in a motherly tone. Every time he asked a question, Yuuki's nerves grew even more frayed.

So Kamishiro had sent Yuuki away for his own good, and then went on a fishing expedition.

sence. The more Yuuki questioned Kamishiro's motives, the more anxious and frustrated he became.

"I must look dead right now. I'll go rest in back of the house," Yuuki said.

He tried to act nonchalant, but felt a little guilty leaving Kamishiro to fend for himself.

"You do look a little green around the gills. Go to bed," the chef said.

What a pushover Kamishiro was. A real softy. He excused Yuuki for being such a worrywart. Yuuki picked up next to the him and took the sudachi out of the

"I should have found some ripper ones," he thought, looking at the small green fruit in his hand.

Kamishiro held up the condensed milk, his eyes looking like a child's.

"I have big plans for this," he said happily. A new idea had probably just occurred to him, but Yuuki felt like asking about it. Something else was on his mind.

"If I ask you something, will you give me an answer?" he said bluntly.

"What?"

"What you were talking to Takai-san about?"

Kamishiro suddenly looked bewildered. Yuuki took the can of milk from his hand and set it near the door.

"Were you gossiping about Shin?" Yuuki asked.

"Nothing like that," Kamishiro said sincerely.

"Oh, I see. Then you must have been talking about Tsukada, and what a pathetic creature he was after he died."

For some reason, Kamishiro's smile. A slight blush warmed Yuuki's cold cheeks, and he was still unable to hold back his fury.

"That's why I don't care if Shiro sleeps with me. It's fine if you want to sleep with a woman. You probably don't do it with gays."

"Sano-kun, cut it out!" Kamishiro ordered, though his eyes still looked sad. *Don't you love yourself, they seemed to be saying.*

Yuuki couldn't stand it. He wanted to be desired, not pitied. And stop calling him Sano-kun. No matter how much sympathy Kamishiro showed, Yuuki still felt upset by it.

"If you think I'm so pathetic, then just sleep with me already!" Yuuki snapped, looking Kamishiro right in the eyes.

Kamishiro's dark eyes steadily stared back at him, without a flicker of hesitation. Yuuki knew that he looked away, or even blinked an eye, and the tense atmosphere in the room would shatter into a million pieces.

As several painful seconds ticked away, neither of them moved. Finally Kamishiro broke the tension.

"Fine, then. 'Comon,' he snapped, grabbing Yuuki's wrist. With his other hand, Kamishiro reached for the stove. But who was the fool? Kamishiro. How could the fine line between anger and compassion be bridged so abruptly?

Kamishiro roughly dragged Yuuki out of the cafe and crossed him toward the back door.

"K Kamishiro-san," Yuuki stuttered nervously. "You asked me to sleep with you. So let's do it." "Wait a minute. You can't seriously..."

"Time's a wasting," Kamishiro said. He limped out door and turned the lock.

It is one cool customer. Yuuki thought. Kamishiro glanced back over his shoulder, tears glistening in his eyes. Yuuki had been trying just to make a joke, but now Kamishiro's face was contorted with pain. Yuuki felt a sharp twinge in his heart.

"Comon," Kamishiro repeated.

"K Kamishiro-san!"

"Shut up and hurry. You're the one who wanted we hit the sack."

Soon they were in Yuuki's bedroom. The unmade bed bore collateral damage from last night's jacking off. Yuuki had no time to feel embarrassed.

"Hey, owwww!" he cried, as Kamishiro roughly tossed him on the bed.

"Just to let you know, I have absolutely no experience with this, so don't complain if I leave a few bruises," Kamishiro barked.

"I leave a few bruises?"

Yuuki shivered all over. He'd never had rough sex before. From the very beginning, Tsukada had treated Yuuki with nothing but tenderness.

"Hurry and undress," Kamishiro ordered.

"No way!" Yuuki protested, but Kamishiro yanked his collar. Yuuki instantly put up his fists.

"Cut it out!" he cried, raking his fingers across Kamishiro's cheek.

But that didn't slow him down in the least. Kamishiro easily pinned both of Yuuki's arms behind his back.

"You idiot," he muttered darkly.

All of a sudden everything changed. Kamishiro let go of Yuuki's wrist and gave him a look.

"Kamishiro-san?" Yuuki whispered.

What had happened? Did the older man realize how scared Yuuki was? Or did Yuuki's outburst get him on? Then again, maybe Kamishiro thought the basic cop routine would make Yuuki instantly stop for

Suddenly Yuuki turned pale.

"What are you doing?" he gasped.

"Taking my clothes off. You should, too."

Kamishiro said, giving him a steely look.

Now Yuuki felt relieved for some reason, but his hands still trembled as he slowly unbuttoned his shirt.

"If it's just intercourse, you can do the same way with a man," Yuuki explained, undoing his buttons. "You don't need to hold back. Close your eyes if you want."

He swept his damp hair away from his face and looked carefully at Kamishiro.

"But there is one other thing," Yuuki said tentatively.

"And that is?"

"I don't suppose you can kiss me?"

"Oh, Sano-kun," Kamishiro sighed.

"What? Does kissing a guy gross you out?"

challenged, daring Kamishiro to do it. He was really dying for him to try.

Yuuki was well aware of his own hidden desires and knew that Kamishiro had sensed them. To keep Kamishiro in the game, Yuuki quickly agrees with him.

"Come, give it the old college try. Kiss me," he urged.

He knew it was a shameless come-on, but he really cared. In any case, he'd already dragged himself through the mud. Why shouldn't he ask for the same yards? Yuuki waited for Kamishiro to take him up on the offer. And waited some more. He was about to throw in the towel, when Kamishiro finally decided to move.

Hah? Yuuki gasped, as Kamishiro wrapped his arms around him. With enough force that it was almost painful. Kamishiro firmly grabbed Yuuki's chin and kissed him.

An intense, insatiable, unrelenting kiss. Yuuki closed his eyes, his chest heaving. Saliva dribbled from the corners of his lips, mingling with his tears.

Ahh...ahh...enough..." Yuuki moaned.

Just then Kamishiro's hot tongue plunged into his mouth. Yuuki shuddered all over with pleasure. He was making so hard he couldn't even undo the rest of his buttons and just grabbed at his shirt instead.

"Uhhnn..." Yuuki groaned, as Kamishiro's tongue brushed the roof of his mouth. His saliva tasted like some rich dessert. As their tongues twined together, Kamishiro's rough lips gently nibbled Yuuki's soft ones.

The last time Yuuki had had sex was a year ago. All the tension stored up in his body was about to burst. He didn't want gentleness. He wanted enough to get him through the pain of loss. He wanted Kamishiro to drive his hard cock into his hole and make the world go away.

But Kamishiro just inserted a finger into his hole.

"That's good," Yuuki moaned, writhing around Kamishiro's waist. He grabbed Kamishiro's cock and started to play with it.

"Wait," Kamishiro whispered. "Not yet."

Now Yuuki looked like a dog begging for a treat. Kamishiro added another finger to the mix, and he kept kissing him.

"Ahhhh..." Yuuki shuddered, gasping for air. Right now, he didn't even care if Kamishiro came. Kamishiro quickly put a pillow under Yuuki's hips, making him feel like he was floating off the bed.

"I'm entering you."

Yuuki just nodded.

Kamishiro's hot, hard penis slowly entered Yuuki's hole.

"Ahh, ahh, ahhhhh..." Yuuki panted, his neck jerking his head backward. After such a long wait, his flesh tingled with electricity.

On the verge of crying out in pain, Yuuki bit down on his lip, hard enough to draw blood. The tip of Kamishiro's engorged cock pressed into the narrow opening, expanding it to its limits. Yuuki's eyes lost their grip around Kamishiro's waist and floated into the air.



It was a comical sight, but Yuuki didn't laugh. Now his toes curled as Kamishiro slid even deeper inside him, then pulled back a little.

"Too hard?"

"I-I'm okay," Yuuki whispered, drenched with desire. "Keep on going."

As he took all Kamishiro had to offer, Yuuki felt his arms get weak. He had been clinging to Kamishiro's back, it was probably covered with scratches by now. Yuuki was about to say something, but was interrupted by a powerful thrust that left him speechless.

"Ahh..." he moaned again.

Even Yuuki couldn't make any sense of the sounds that erupted from his mouth. He clung tighter against the pain and rode out the paroxysms. As Kamishiro thrust deeper and deeper, his saliva dripped from Yuuki's lips. Kamishiro licked it up with his tongue, sending chills down Yuuki's spine.

Yuuki came again, spurring on Kamishiro's stomach and the hem of his shirt. Tossed and turned by sheer ecstasy, Yuuki was reduced to a creature of his lusts.

"More..." he begged. "More..."

All he could do was repeat the words over and over. Suddenly Kamishiro grasped his balls, pumping into his deepest depths. As Kamishiro kept thrusting inside the quivering fleshy folds, Yuuki's eyes flew open.

Now it was Kamishiro's turn. His moans echoed around the small room.

"Hah' Hah' Hah'" Kamishiro panted, in search of his own orgasm.

Suddenly, the bed stopped creaking as warm liquid poured out of his cock. As he spurted out the last of his seed, Kamishiro's body shook with a small tremor. After a moment, he finally pulled out of Yuuki.

But spasms kept raging through Yuuki's body, sending a wet gooshing rush, his white waterfall again flowed.

"Sorry," Yuuki whispered.

"But are you apologizing?" Kamishiro wanted to know, but he didn't even have the strength to ask the question.

Chapter 6

"Looks like you're getting a bit of a curl at the ends," Yuuki observed.

"I guess so," Kamishiro grunted back.

"The weather's turned cold, but how about a haircut?"

Yuuki picked up the scissors and leaned over. He waited for an okay, but it didn't come.

A single chair sat in front of the bathroom mirror, newspapers spread underneath. It was obvious that Kamishiro had something else in mind when Yuuki had asked him to take off his clothes.

"You're going to use those things?" Kamishiro asked, staring at the sharp silver scissors. He was a bit flustered, and maybe even a little afraid.

"Oh, please. You're always playing with knives in the kitchen," Yuuki reminded him.

"Two different things," Kamishiro said stoutly.

"Common, take your clothes off."

"Can't you cut it with my clothes on?"

"It's a pain to clean up afterward. Hair sticks to the clothes, and it won't come out in the wash."

When Kamishiro still resisted, Yuuki told him that he was the only person who had stripped naked on the first day they met, and he should have nothing to be embarrassed about.

Finally, Kamishiro pulled his t-shirt over his head.

Yuuki nibbled on his shoulders.

"Maybe first we should do the...
like to get undressed for," Yuuki cooed.

He put his hands around Kamishiro's waist and licked off the sweat beading up...
Kamishiro jerked a little, which was more...
encouragement. Yuuki bent down and started...
his nipple.

"Haa..." Kamishiro gasped.

Shall I continue? Yuuki asked with his eyes.

"Whatever strikes your fancy. Just don't get carried away with yourself."

In lieu of background music, the television was blaring from the living room. The...
streamed in through the skylight. Yuuki's...
laughter only added to the atmosphere.

While they were having breakfast...
Yuuki had offered to cut Kamishiro's hair.

"Right now?" Kamishiro whined. When...
him grudgingly strip off his jeans was so...
Yuuki could hardly stand it.

"What length do you think is good?" Kamishiro asked.

Yuuki laughed so hard that tears came to his eyes as Kamishiro stood there in his hilly-white boxers.

"Okay. Go ahead and cut it," Kamishiro stated, but Yuuki's hands suddenly started to tremble.

"D-don't worry," he nervously assured him. "I'm a pro. I cut my grandfather's hair sometimes."

"Just don't lop off an ear or cut my...
okay?"

With a meek expression on his face, Kamishiro sat in the chair with a towel around his neck.

"We got to wet it down," Yuuki said.

"Whatever," Kamishiro sighed in resignation, as he wet the towel, so to speak.

Yuuki ran a comb through Kamishiro's damp hair, picked up a piece, and snipped. Bits of black hair fell down and speckled the white towel.

"That tickles," Kamishiro grunted.

"Sorry."

As Yuuki kept on snipping, bits of hair drifted to the floor.

"I'd like the menu to change with the seasons," Kamishiro said.

Now that he'd gotten his hands on such a high-society owner of Fuuka was eager to put him to use. Yuuki made the suggestion as he gazed out the window at the unmistakable signs of autumn.

During the day they were employer and employee, but as soon as closing time rolled around, they went out the pleasures of each other's bodies.

Every night, in the bed that had once seemed so small, Yuuki enjoyed having sex with Kamishiro. But by day, they made a point to only talk business. If not every sigh or innocent gesture would arouse appetites even more.

"Because summer vegetables aren't in season yet," Yuuki went on.

"You mean shift from leafy vegetables to roots."

and tubers?" Kamishiro asked. He took out the daily produce from the cardboard box: a few potatoes, sweet potato, cabbage, *dankon* (a kind of radish). Kamishiro frowned.

"You need to think these things over, you know."

"Ah, hell," Yuuki whined, reaching for the chef. "No matter what I suggest, you always say a bad idea."

"Hey, you!" Kamishiro laughed, shaking his head. They simply couldn't touch each other when they were joking around. Because their jokes always led to another, and soon they'd ended up bed together instead of opening the can.

The days went on. One morning, Yuuki heard a loud barking sound from outside. When he went to see what it was, Kamishiro was standing there with a mutt.

"You can't be serious! Are you serious about that thing in here?" Yuuki protested. The dog looked at Kamishiro with a crestfallen expression. Kamishiro gave it a sympathetic smile.

"Sorry, buddy, he says no. Guess you're a little scary."

Even more than an amateur like Yuuki, Kamishiro should have been a little more concerned about the sanitation. Yet he looked utterly dejected, as if he was kicking out the dog.

"Well, let's go, Jonko," Kamishiro said.

A strange name for a canine that obviously was a male. As he listened to Kamishiro, Yuuki

realized that he'd been a little harsh. Maybe he should drop his defenses and take a few risks.

Smiling to himself, Yuuki watched the human footed friend clumsily descend the hill.

"I must be kidding myself," Yuuki muttered. The earthshaking had happened. The same old, same continued just like before, or so he wanted to believe.

Yuuki wanted them to be just like any other couple, but he knew that would never happen. He couldn't bear the thought of parting with the passions stirred by Kamishiro's clumsy, earnest lovemaking.

Those passions had cost him Shin. But after losing this precious peace with Kamishiro, Yuuki found it hard to turn away from the rest of his life. He still wanted to live, so he sought out Kamishiro every night and found himself in pleasure.

"This side is pretty short," Kamishiro commented.

"Aw, c'mon. It's not exactly a buzz cut."

"I know. I know. Just shut up already."

Yuuki evened up the right and left sides of Kamishiro's hair with a scrupulous eye. Though Yuuki figured it was only a trim, Kamishiro's hair was about an inch shorter.

He brushed aside Kamishiro's bangs and pushed back the curly wisps that covered his ears. Kamishiro's hair was actually covered by a bandana, but when

it was combed, he became a different man entirely.

Yuuki stood back and gave Kamishiro a good look, scanning over his rugged features.

"How about a shave?" Yuuki asked. He ran the hair off the hands and smiled. It was a complete turnaround from a month ago, when he had met. Now Yuuki's voice was filled with a certain concern.

"Kamishiro-san, everything is a mess. The kitchen cooking is a total mess. Your face always looks like it's somewhere."

"I can shave myself, thank you very much. When it comes to razor blades—"

"You still don't trust me," Yuuki sniffed. "Let's see your face, then."

He took a razor and shaving cream from the shelf and went to work. Surprisingly, Kamishiro didn't protest.

"Your beard stings something terrible when you don't shave, you know," Yuuki grinned.

"No, it doesn't. It feels like heaven."

He wasn't wrong, but the way he said it was a little off. Only this morning, he had pressed his face against Kamishiro's chest. The stimulation set his cheeks aflame. When Kamishiro buried his face between his legs, Yuuki had felt the rough stubble grazing his thighs.

"Shut up and raise your chin," Yuuki demanded like an adult addressing a child.

"Okay, okay," Kamishiro sighed, and then pressed his lips together.

Yuuki smeared shaving cream all over Kamishiro's face, then just stared at the top of his head for several seconds, working up his nerve.

"What's up? I look good with a little stubble. This face is too good to waste, right?"

"This uncouth, unshaven face of yours is the real you," Yuuki declared.

He leaned over and ran the razor over the white track of skin that appeared behind the curtain of light.

"Your skin is really smooth," Yuuki said.

"Not as smooth as yours," Kamishiro smiled, looking at Yuuki.

Yuuki thought that Kamishiro was going to hug him, but instead he pinched his cheeks.

"Ow! That hurts! They're not toys, you know," Kamishiro complained.

"But your cheeks look so luscious," Kamishiro

troughed already. "Close your mouth again."

"Yes, doctor," Kamishiro replied meekly.

Yuuki grinned despite himself as he put the tip of his tongue to Kamishiro's face. Close enough to taste Kamishiro's breath on his face, Yuuki felt desire for him.

"Ow!" Kamishiro yelled suddenly.

At the very tip of his chin, a tiny nick spurted a drop of blood. Yuuki stuck out his tongue and licked it.

"Tsk," he muttered. Kamishiro gave him a glare. "What? Don't you like the taste of my blood?"

"The shaving cream tastes bad."
 "Your blood tastes a little salty."

He leaned over and gave Kamishiro
 pouting lips.

"But I don't hate it," he whispered
 voice.

After two or three more kisses of
 ran his tongue down to the nape of Kamishiro's
 The razor fell from his hand to the floor and
 the last traces of shaving cream with
 brushed Kamishiro's hair back with his

Yuuki stepped back to admire
 was Kamishiro's familiar face, but
 different than usual.

He almost reminds me of Isakuro.
 sadly.

A few short hours had passed
 and yet his body—still bearing finger
 last night—began to throb of its own

"We still have time, you know."
 "Ah."

Turning his back to the mirror,
 Kamishiro's lap and straddled his thighs. He
 dot of shaving cream from the tip of Kamishiro's
 and then puckered his mouth.

"Hmm..." Yuuki moaned, as they
 their lips together.

Yuuki darted his tongue into
 mouth and took his temperature.
 responded with a moan.

Suddenly their lips parted and a puff of

Then Kamishiro stuck out just the tip of his
 in the room filled with morning sunlight, they
 of their tongues as their bodies exploded with
 sensation.

Then Yuuki thrust his hips forward, demanding
 caresses.

"You mean you want it here?" Kamishiro smiled,
 Yuuki's buttocks and thighs. His low, sexy purr
 break out in goose bumps.

No, Yuuki cried out, his loins undulating with
 intensity.

But he hadn't gotten himself all worked up just to
 get off in a huff. His pulsating groin almost beyond
 of Yuuki got off Kamishiro's lap.

"Not a morning person, eh?" Kamishiro teased.
 "Morning has nothing to do with it. I want to do
 want to do," Yuuki said firmly, kneeling between
 his legs.

Isakuro the hair scattered across the floor would
 tossed him out, but he didn't even notice it.
 on all fours like a dog, Yuuki ran his tongue
 the cross-hatched scar on Kamishiro's right leg.

Kamishiro shuddered and started to get up, but
 quickly grabbed his ankles and licked the scar.
 Kamishiro's whole body tensed like he had just

Yuuki "Kamishiro gasped.

After several days of sleeping together, Yuuki
 gotten Kamishiro to stop calling him "Sano-
 so far he only called him "Yuuki" as sort of a

"Whoa, that's risky territory the..." Yuuki gasped again.

For some reason, Kamishiro's gasps were turning Yuuki on. He was only licking Kamishiro's wounds, and yet Yuuki's loins began to burn.

"Risky territory? Let's try a place..." Yuuki said seductively, diving into Kamishiro's tights. "Kamishiro's tights..."

"Haaaa!" Kamishiro gasped, but Yuuki ignored him.

He parted the dark bush of pubic hair and grabbed Kamishiro's erect penis. With no hesitation, Yuuki took it into his mouth.

As Yuuki started to suck, his hair fell across his face. He impatiently pushed it back and kept indulging himself with Kamishiro's sweet, salty flesh. When Yuuki drew in his cheeks, Kamishiro's cock brushed against the side of his mouth, leaving a salty taste.

Without lifting his head, Yuuki put his right hand around the base of Kamishiro's rod and held it steady with his left. The rest of the penis, from the base of the tip, Yuuki covered with his mouth, fanning it to satisfy Kamishiro's desire.

"You!" Kamishiro cried, his waist slowly pumping back and forth.

He was definitely succumbing to the pleasure. Yuuki reached his finger behind Kamishiro's cock and massaged the back of his pouch. Kamishiro's cock suddenly clamped around Yuuki's wrist, sending a pleasant heat down his arm.

"Son of a bitch!" Kamishiro shrieked, getting up. Suddenly Yuuki found himself being lifted up further, followed by what sounded very much like spitting out a lollipop. He licked the saliva from his lips and grinned.

"If you want to do it, let's go to bed," Kamishiro said, his penis poking out from the opening of his pants.

"Why? Right here is just fine," Yuuki purred. He cleared his throat in a most ungentlemanly way and then grabbed the can of shaving cream.

"You can't be serious," choked Kamishiro, who panicked all of a sudden. "You are not shaving down there!"

"I'd never do something stupid like that," Yuuki said, though he couldn't repress a smile at the very thought. Instead he squirted shaving cream on Kamishiro's cock.

A sensation completely different from human touch made Kamishiro's butt twitch all over.

"Too cold?" Yuuki asked, wet with lust.

"Cut it out!" Kamishiro snapped.

"But I won't shave a thing, I promise."

What Yuuki was going to do was much more serious. He turned his back to Kamishiro and dropped to the floor. He then slowly lowered himself on Kamishiro's cock.

"Ahhhh..." Yuuki sighed, as Kamishiro's hard cock penetrated him with a squelching sound. The sound as Kamishiro entered him made Yuuki think the shaving cream was such a good idea. But

halfway in and halfway out, it was way too tight.

"Haa...haa...Kamishiro-san.."

Yuuki panted for Kamishiro to suck his testicles, jam it in deep. He lowered his hips, but his cock still didn't quite hit the mark.

"I said let's do it in the bedroom," Kamishiro grunted, getting to his feet. Topped off by Yuuki, he lunged forward and had to grab the edge of the sink.

"Ahh...baaaa..."

"I need a towel," Kamishiro said.

"A what?"

"I need to wipe my face and put some aftershave. I'll get razor rash."

Kamishiro whistled cheerfully as he walked around the shelf above the sink, totally ignoring Yuuki's animal desires.

"Where the hell is a towel?" he asked.

"It won't be up there," Yuuki panted, still holding onto the sink.

"Sex can wait. My tender skin can't."

What a big meanie! Yuuki thought, tears springing to his eyes. He grabbed a towel from a shelf and tossed it to Kamishiro.

"I was going to wipe you down, really I was," Yuuki apologized.

"I want a hot steamy towel. Should I throw it in the microwave?" Kamishiro suggested.

"Are you joking?"

"Yeah, just kidding," Kamishiro said, slapping Yuuki's ass with the palm of his hand.

"That's mean," Yuuki pouted.

"Yeah. But you still need to wait a minute, okay?"

Yuuki looked in the mirror and watched Kamishiro wipe off his face and then slap his cheeks with aftershave. Then he moved behind Yuuki and rubbed it on his ear.

"Thanks for waiting," he whispered.

"No problem," Yuuki sighed, wondering what was coming up next.

Now a completely different aroma wafted from Kamishiro as he sucked the back of Yuuki's neck. Yuuki turned his head, allowing Kamishiro to enter him. As the union reflected in the mirror, he closed his eyes.

"Ahh...ahhhh...ahhhh..."

Who was this pumping him like a piston from behind? As Kamishiro stroked his penis with his hand, Yuuki started to moan. But compared to his memories of Akada, these sweet caresses were tinged with sadness.

"Spread your legs wider," Kamishiro directed.

"I can't," Yuuki gasped.

Kamishiro quickly pushed down his jeans for Yuuki extracted his right leg and spread his legs as wide as he could.

"Ahh...ahh...ohhhh..."

Yuuki's fingers were the same color as the beige towel he held onto for dear life, supporting himself against Kamishiro's thrusts that shook his body. Having once closed his legs, he couldn't seem to open them again. For a moment he didn't even know which man was violating the inside of his body.

"Hah hah ahhhhh "

Without waiting for Kamishiro to say a word, Yuuki ejaculated first, splashing the low sheaves near his feet. Kamishiro held onto Yuuki's waist to keep him from falling over. Too weak to withstand the constriction, Yuuki slumped against the sink.

"So you got greedy and came a little closer, eh?" Kamishiro muttered in a dull voice. A trace of affection seemed totally gone.

Yuuki wanted to believe that Kamishiro was simply exhausted from their energetic coupling. He didn't remember if he had called out to Kamishiro in the heat of passion, but Kamishiro must have sensed who Yuuki really wanted to have inside him.

Why shouldn't he be upset, Yuuki thought. Nobody wanted to be a substitute for somebody else. Yuuki would have understood perfectly. Kamishiro had pushed him away. Suddenly Kamishiro pushed his finger between Yuuki's clenched teeth.

"You'll end up with a crooked neck," Kamishiro warned. "If you need to take a breather, suck on this. Have a little chew, if you please."

"Uhhh..." Yuuki mumbled.

The alignment of his teeth was the last thing on his mind right now, but he did as told and sucked on Kamishiro's finger. Kamishiro didn't give a damn about shaving or cutting his hair, but his fingernails were always carefully manicured. This was crucial, for people who cooked, he claimed.

As Kamishiro carefully probed the inside of his mouth, Yuuki's amp privates stiffened again.

More he thought wildly, as Kamishiro stroked his cheek.

Suddenly Kamishiro took out his fingers and pressed Yuuki's chin. Now Kamishiro's lips traveled from Yuuki's earlobe to his cheek to the corner of his mouth.

Yuuki started to moan. Twisting his neck, he greeted with a kiss.

Their tongues entwined again with vigor. A wave of pleasure pounded Yuuki's loins. He felt his temperature rise and ejaculated for the second time.

Haaaa aaaaah aaaaah "

Was that him sighing, or Kamishiro? Yuuki closed his eyes, but quickly looked away from the mirror in the mirror.

"Hey, Kamishiro-san! Nice haircut!" a girl was talking to him.

"Was it your idea? Or did somebody twist your arm?" the other girl asked.

"I liked it better before. Why did you go and cut it?"

"No way! This looks cooler on him!"

They sat at the counter and teased Kamishiro about how cute he was. Kamishiro smiled wryly and ate his ice cream. He knew there wasn't a "cute" bone in his large, rugged body.

It was after dinner, and the usual pair of high school girls were their only customers. Since they never did anything but ice cream, Kamishiro didn't need

to hang around. Yuuki tilted his head toward the boys, indicating that it was fine for Kamishiro to leave, but the king of the kitchen stubbornly stayed where he was.

When Kamishiro was in the kitchen, the girls always sat at the counter. Tonight they wore their black winter sailor uniforms, hiking up their skirts to show off their typical "summer" outfits.

Every time they swung their legs, they played peek-a-boo with their thighs, but Kamishiro never bothered to look. Yuuki wondered if he should lead them back to their usual seats. But if they wanted to flash their little booty, let them flash it at Kamishiro on his own time alone.

"Kamishiro-san, you got a girlfriend?" the girls asked.

Unlike Yuuki, whom she'd known since he was a backpack-toting kid, this stranger had an air of mystery.

Kamishiro smiled and shrugged.

"Sure," he said.

"That sucks! Really?" she whined.

"Something wrong with that?"

"Where is she? Back in Sapporo?"

Taken aback by their nosiness, Kamishiro winked at Yuuki instead.

That was the same question I've been asking him, Yuuki thought, feeling disappointed.

"Not Sapporo. She showed up after I came here," Kamishiro said.

"Seriously?" the girls cried as they popped out of their balloons.

Now they were dead set on wringing information

from Yuuki felt uncomfortable, but laughing it off seemed to take them in his stride.

You're not here to entertain the customers, Yuuki thought. He set two big ice cream sundaes in front of the girls and glared at Kamishiro.

"Yuuki-chan would know," the big girl said. "No, I mean, that kind of thing is Kamishiro's business," Yuuki said weakly.

"Tell us. Who is it?" she persisted. Stamped for an answer, Yuuki silently cursed Kamishiro, who was feigning innocence back in the kitchen.

Let you wait until later! Yuuki thought. There was definitely be payback after closing time. Suddenly, the front door opened.

"What in the—!" Yuuki gasped, but the rest of his sentence didn't make it out of his mouth. The last person he'd ever expected to see at Fuuka again was Shinjiro.

"Shinjiro!" Yuuki called. "Long time no see," Shinjiro said casually, looking nothing was out of the ordinary. He looked around the shop and then ambled up to the counter.

"Okay if I sit here?" he asked politely. "I'm sure."

Shinjiro moved to a stool at the very end of the counter, the one that used to belong to Tsukada. Yuuki didn't have the heart to tell him to move.

The usual time, the usual place. Was this farcical friendship about to continue on its merry way? What had happened on that rainy night had ended

his relationship with Shin. Now he was faced with Kamishiro, but Yuuki couldn't stop feeling that none of this was real.

"So you finally stopped by for a while," Kamishiro called from the kitchen.

"Yeah."

Kamishiro knew what Shin had done to Yuuki, but still faced the man with a smile. True, he was surprised to see him, but certainly not to hear him exit as Yuuki.

"Well, that's that," Yuuki muttered miserably. He ignored Kamishiro's gaze and set a glass down for Shin.

There were so many things he wanted to say where could he even start? The more Yuuki thought about it, the more confused he felt. Just what should he tell Shin right now? Feeling overwhelmed, Yuuki headed for the kitchen.

"Sano, just a sec," Shin called out to him.

Startled, Yuuki stopped in his tracks. Shin grabbed his wrist and pulled him closer.

"Shin," Yuuki protested.

Shin stood on tiptoe and gazed at Yuuki's face. His eyes moved to the scars still visible around the nape of Yuuki's neck. Yuuki started to sweat.

"What happened to—?" Shin gasped.

"I'm fine. Forget about it," Yuuki said in a clipped tone.

Shin didn't seem to want to pursue the matter and started to talk to Kamishiro in the kitchen. Every once in a while, he bantered with the girls.

They had been in the café together on countless occasions, yet this was the first time Shin had spoken to Yuuki directly. Yuuki scowled at himself as he attempted to drop on them.

"We have some nice sea bream, would you like poeleur style?" Kamishiro suggested.

"Po what?" Shin grunted, looking blank.

"Braised in butter."

"Well, why didn't you say so in the first place?" Yuuki smirked.

Yuuki burst out laughing. Some of the tension leaked from his body.

"Forget the damn fish. I like red meat better," Shin said cheekily.

Was he pretending to forget that terrible night? Yuuki suddenly felt like a load had been lifted off his shoulders. He put his hand on his chest and heaved a sigh.

"I'll take a beer, too," Shin said.

"Did you drive here?" Kamishiro asked.

"Nah, left the car at home."

Sorry about last time, his apologetic face seemed to say.

"Say, if I do get sloshed, could I just crash here tonight?" Shin asked with a smile. "Finding a taxi this late at night is a bloody pain. Camping out on the floor would be nice."

"Um, well..." Yuuki muttered, stalling for time.

Yuuki and Kamishiro exchanged glances. Well, that was that. If Shin stayed here tonight, they would

have to put their "other" plans on hold.

"Wow. This is good," Shin beamed, savoring a perfectly-grilled steak.

As usual, he had arrived at Fuuka on an empty stomach. He shoveled the meat into his mouth. Taking much hamburger, his eyes sparkling like a child's.

"Nothing beats a cold beer after work," Shin declared, but his effusive smile provided little comfort to his soul.

He chewed his way through Kamishiro's cooking and then lit an after-dinner cigarette. The smoke drifted across the counter and was sucked up by the ventilation fan.

"Yeah, that really hit the spot," Shin said, washing away his empty plate.

After another drag, he stubbed out the cigarette in the ashtray as Yuuki watched. Shin seemed content, but the way he extinguished his cigarette hinted at some deeper, darker emotions.

"You know something?" he asked Kamishiro.

"What?" the chef asked idly.

"You two are quite a pair," he pointed out, as there was a break in the classical music that flowed through the café.

The eyes of the two girls sitting next to him popped wide open.

Oh, come on! their expressions seemed to say, looking back and forth between Yuuki and Kamishiro.

"Don't," Yuuki warned, but Shin was just getting started.

"I spy a few wicked hickies. You must be really

in bed, huh?" he said slyly.

"Shin."

"I thumbs down to me, thumbs up to him. I'm here's a reason for that."

"Shin, you..."

Shin jerked his thumb at Kamishiro in the direction.

"So this guy crossed home plate first, huh? That sucks ass. I barely got to second base."

Kamishiro had been holding his tongue the whole time. Now he was glaring at Shin.

"Uh, we'll just pay and go," one of the girls said, sliding a thousand yen note on the counter. They darted out the door before Yuuki could even give them their order.

"It's because you're so damned easy," Shin grinned with a crooked grin. "I was biding my time, putting my hands to myself, and then some guy moves in, takes my nose and gets to play with you 24/7. You led me for a fool, Yuuki."

"Stop it, Shin!" Yuuki snapped back.

He couldn't stand to see the painful look on Yuuki's face while he verbally abused him. Their screams echoed around the empty café.

Who was this person? In all the years they had known each other, Shin had never treated him this way.

I turned him into this, Yuuki thought guiltily. *I'm making him say these terrible things.*

"If I knew you were this easy, I would have run away with you that night."

"Shin, please! I'm begging you!"

Standing eyeball-to-eyeball with Kamishiro, Shin continued to assault Yuuki with words, but the way his hands quivered on the counter suggested that these were not Shin's true feelings.

After Isukada died, Shin helped fill the gap, the hole left behind, though they had no physical connection between them. Even now, Yuuki believed that Shin had really gone out of his way for him.

I should have jumped into his arms and killed him. Yuuki thought. That regret was coupled with the reality of losing a dear friend.

Yuuki gazed at Shin's profile, a combination of sadness and resignation. He stood there like a stump, not moving a muscle. Why was Shin acting like this now? Yuuki knew the answer, though he didn't want to admit it to himself. The sad truth was that he had rejected Shin and sought refuge in Kamishiro's arms. But how could he ever find the words to apologize?

"And yet this is the guy who kicked him!" Shin said, staring at Kamishiro.

"K killed..."

"You were going to hide that fact forever, weren't you? But you killed Isukada."

Kamishiro killed Tsukada.

Yuuki noticed a slight quiver in Shin's voice, but Kamishiro said nothing in his own defense. He didn't run. He didn't turn away. He just stared back at Shin without twitching an eyebrow.

"Kamishiro-san?" Yuuki gasped, attempting a smile through his tears.

The pitiful look in Kamishiro's eyes told him

everything he needed to know. Yuuki suddenly touched his own face. His cheek felt ice cold, a chill that spread his whole body.

Shin leaned over the counter toward Kamishiro. "Are you here to atone for your sins? Or was it so pathetic that you felt sorry for him? Was that it? Or what was your ass in his face?"

"Shin!" Yuuki cried, slapping Shin across the face.

Shin was spinning out of control and Yuuki needed to stop him. Or maybe he just didn't want to hear what Kamishiro had to say.

"Do you mean you knew about this, Yuuki?" "I knew and slept with him anyway!" Shin spat out, holding his hand against his red cheek.

"What do you mean I knew?" Yuuki said desperately.

Isukada had died in an accident, but Shin was claiming that Kamishiro killed him. It had to be true. Yuuki glanced anxiously at Kamishiro. *Tell me it's true. Just say it isn't true!*

"You're right. I killed him," Kamishiro said, looking straight at Shin. "It's my fault that Tsukada's dead."

"Kamishiro-san!" Yuuki gasped. "Could it be true? Could the man whose warmth I sought out and devoured, the man who made his body tremble with joy..."

"I'm sorry I never told you, Yuuki," Kamishiro said quietly.

He sounds kind of relieved. Yuuki thought. Now

Kamishiro's past was finally exposed for all to see.

Kamishiro really had nothing to say in return, and it vaguely occurred to Yuuki that he ought to say something. He knew that others had been injured in the avalanche, but it had never occurred to Yuuki that Kamishiro might have been one of them.

Showing up out of the blue, insisting on working for peanuts, no history other than his name—these things made sense now. Yuuki just had never connected the dots.

"If I hadn't lost my footing that day, we wouldn't have died."

Yuuki didn't answer, had nothing to say. Out of all the members of that expedition party, only he and Tsukada suffer the cruel vicissitudes of fate.

"So you forgot all about Tsukada. I jumped into bed with his killer," Shin accused.

Though cursed as a murderer, Kamishiro looked steadily at Yuuki.

"He hasn't forgotten about him," he insisted.

He didn't seem to be saying this to get Yuuki to agree with him. He wasn't criticizing Shin. Maybe he was just trying to convince himself.

"He didn't forget. Not at all," Kamishiro repeated.

No, Yuuki hadn't forgotten. After all, he was trying to make Kamishiro into a substitute for Tsukada.

"You are a real piece of work," Shin remarked.

"He's not the kind of person who can just be thrown away," Kamishiro stated clearly.

Shin abruptly stopped his stream of abuse. Yuuki

Kamishiro was suggesting that Yuuki could still forget even if he could never forget Tsukada. Let he who would sin, the proverb went. That's what he was trying to get Shin to understand.

Shin could have brushed the statement aside, but he looked back at Kamishiro with his mouth wide open.

"What dumb crap are you spouting?" he asked.

"I think that applies to both of us."

"Guess so," Shin muttered to himself.

Yuuki almost thought that he was hearing things, but Shin's voice was so hard to understand.

A friend like you is important to Yuuki. If that night hadn't happened, nothing would have happened between us, either."

"Then I'm the bigger fool in all this," Shin said. He quickly left the cave with slumped shoulders. Yuuki didn't bother to run after him. Nothing changed the fact that he had rejected Shin.

"I'm sorry, Yuuki," Kamishiro said suddenly.

"What is he apologizing for now?" Yuuki asked. "For Tsukada's death? For deceiving Yuuki?" "He's sorry that they'd even slept together."

Yuuki couldn't be sure, and Kamishiro didn't

Chapter 7

"You knew everything all along?" Yuuki blurted

Kamishiro didn't answer. His back was turned, Yuuki couldn't read the expression on his face. But he could imagine, and that alone made his heart ache. Even if he closed his eyes, Kamishiro was still there.

Sleep with me already!

When Yuuki had raged against him that day, Kamishiro had looked at him with those same sad eyes. Even when Kamishiro was making love to him, he seemed to be gritting his teeth to endure the pain.

Then again, hadn't Yuuki closed his own eyes? Every time Kamishiro held Yuuki in his arms, his sins must have resurrected in his mind. Maybe he had started with him in the first place to atone for his crime.

And if he had, that was sad beyond words. Yuuki trembled as he recalled how foolish he had been.

"Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

"If I had, you never would have hired me. I needed to be the arm you could lean on in Tsukada's place."

"What makes you think I needed an arm to lean

Yuuki snapped, hating Kamishiro's matter-of-fact answer. "I didn't know the first thing about you! I didn't ask for your help, and you shouldn't have barged in

where you didn't belong!"

Yuuki couldn't hurl this abuse at him face-to-face. With his back turned, his rage expressed itself in his shaking shoulders. The anger told him to do more violence, and Yuuki was glad that this was the first time a day when customers were likely to stop by.

"I thought I had been asked," Kamishiro insisted.

"By who? By me?"

"By Tsukada-san."

Yuuki did not want to look at Kamishiro, but he couldn't help but turn around. Kamishiro looked blurry through Yuuki's veil of tears. His vision was clouded, he saw that Kamishiro was shaking his head.

"What do you mean, Tsukada-san said

"I met him three years ago on Asahidake Mountain. He told me a lot about you. I offered him to bring you along, but he said you were already dead. Tsukada liked knowing someone was taking care of him. Then he could never die. Nothing had ever happened to him."

But if anything happens, take care of him for me. Was that a joke? Or was Tsukada being serious? Moments before the avalanche swallowed him up, the look in Tsukada's eyes had said, *Don't forget.*

Or so Kamishiro thought. But with the avalanche barreling down upon them, who knows what Tsukada was thinking? Rational thought at such a time would have been impossible.

"Why did you come here now?"

Yuuki said.

"If you wanted to apologize, you should have said so to his parents instead."

"I did before I came here. That's where I heard his name mentioned."

"My name? By Tsukada's parents?"

The look that Kamishiro gave Yuuki telegraphed regret at the delay. Because of him, memories that had faded with time had been brought painfully into the present.

"With you not around, I would have been able to put this all behind me someday," Yuuki muttered. If not this year, then the year after that. Or maybe it would take ten years, who knows? But he finally would have found a way to put those ghosts to rest.

"The scars on your leg?"

"Ah."

Kamishiro still dragged his leg. Swept along by the hard snow, had he suffered a serious compound fracture. Yuuki had heard that Tsukada's body showed visible scars. Had Kamishiro's blood marked the place where he lay buried? Had he groaned in agony, calling to his companions, while Tsukada's life had snuffed out before he could even speak?

"Were you in the hospital a long time?"

"Three months. Another six months in rehab."

But he was still alive. He was still alive, unlike Tsukada.

Yuuki should hate him for that. He stared at Kamishiro's right leg, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't blame him for surviving.

"You didn't kill Tsukada-san. And I'm not angry about an accident that happened a year ago. That's the truth. I don't know enough about the mountains to come to the conclusion that you killed him."

Yuuki looked into Kamishiro's eyes and continued.

"When Tsukada-san died, I attended the funeral as a friend. Not as family, and certainly not as his lover. Even on the night his remains were returned, his parents made no effort to contact me. That's how I feel I meant to them. And frankly, you don't strike me as the *Good Samaritan* type, either."

As Yuuki spelled out the cold, hard facts, he somehow felt they were talking about a stranger.

One day after Tsukada's death, Yuuki had thrown himself at Takai's feet and confessed everything in his heart. Afterward, the solid mass of grief in his heart began to melt, but only slightly. Knowing that it would never disappear entirely, Yuuki gave up fighting against the dying of the light and tried to let things settle of their own accord. But forgetting about Tsukada—and forgiving Kamishiro—was probably impossible now.

"So Tsukada's parents know who I am?"

Just what had they told Kamishiro? Even if they vaguely knew of their son's sexual orientation, Yuuki had never imagined that his existence mattered to them. That was why he didn't even bother to speak at the funeral. Kamishiro was exposing all his raw nerves to the light. He turned to him and forced a smile.

"You've done enough, Kamishiro-san."

"Eh?"

Sorry to be such a taskmaster up till now, I don't want to take advantage of you any longer. You can go.

Yuuki.

Don't call me that, Yuuki wanted to say. But he was afraid if he raised his voice, his throat would tear at.

As long as you're around, I'll never be able to say it. It'll be nothing but pain and misery," he said, as calmly as he could.

Yuuki.

Don't call me that! Get out! Get out already!"

If he called him by his first name one more time, Yuuki could never hold back his tears. Why did Kamishiro have to tell him about Tsukada? He wanted to leave before it really sunk in.

Tsukada had died, and Kamishiro had blamed himself for the accident. Some man he'd never seen had come to lend a hand in Tsukada's place. It didn't matter what—physically or spiritually—Kamishiro had thrown himself into the meaning of "being there for him."

He had been hiding from him every time they went to bed together. Now Yuuki was incapable of leaving him. Suddenly he remembered their first winter, when Kamishiro had come in with that bright backpack. He had posed as a man living hand to hand, and Yuuki had totally believed him.

Kamishiro certainly couldn't have quit his job on the best of terms. Even though Kamishiro insisted he could get by on minimum wage, Yuuki doubted he was rotting in money. His medical

bills after the accident must have been enormous.

Tell me something first -

If he could roll back the clock to that summer day, Yuuki wished he had asked more questions.

"I don't need your sympathy."

"That's not it," Kamishiro said, but verbal denials were hard to believe. Or rather, Yuuki didn't want to believe them in the first place.

He must have appeared so comical to Kamishiro. Such a stupid drama queen.

"I'm sorry," Kamishiro said again.

His voice sounded far, far away. Those clumsy footsteps that Yuuki's ears had become accustomed to seemed heavier than usual. Yuuki closed his eyes and listened to the odd rhythm of Kamishiro's gait. He opened them to see Kamishiro standing there with his backpack, his only piece of luggage.

He was wearing the same sneakers, still grimy with the dust of the road. He had removed the bandana but still wore his cook's outfit. Whether he took the bus or hitchhiked, he couldn't help but look like an overgrown trick-or-treater who had missed Halloween.

Needless to say, at this time of night, no trains would be stopping at the station. After he kicked him out, Kamishiro would have no place else to go. Staring out the window at the dark landscape, Yuuki suddenly felt uneasy.

"Well, then," Kamishiro said.

"Ah."

Was he really leaving? Yuuki was dying to ask but he choked down the words. If he let him stay until



morning, his resolve would definitely disappear.

Yuuki stood rooted to the spot as Kamishiro brushed by him. He heard his foot dragging through the gravel outside the door, maybe for the last time.

"Kamishiro-san—"

Yuuki looked out the window, but the world was engulfed in black. Not even Kamishiro's shadow was silhouetted against the glow of street lights.

When they first met, Kamishiro told Yuuki that he was prepared to camp out under the stars. But that was in the summer. Now Kamishiro would freeze to death if he tried something so foolish.

Yuuki placed one uncertain foot ahead of the other and finally made it to the door. Kamishiro might still be in shouting distance, but Yuuki couldn't force himself to pull the door handle.

He took several shallow breaths, but his heartbeat showed no signs of slowing down. Exasperated, he clucked reproachfully to himself. Nobody was looking on, and yet he scolded himself to show a little class in the face of defeat.

Yuuki tore his eyes away from the gloomy outside world. He didn't want to look at the place where Kamishiro had disappeared. He locked the door and retreated into the house, making sure not to look at the still-messy kitchen.

Traces of Kamishiro remained in the living room, in his bedroom, in the bathroom. Every time Kamishiro's image rose to mind, Yuuki shook his head to drive the phantoms away.

"Maybe I should shut this place down and go

home," Yuuki muttered.

He had never considered the option, not even when Sakada died. Yuuki closed his eyes. He recognized the face that appeared in his mind's eye, but he dared not think of his name.

"I thought you knew. It somehow slipped my mind. I really am sorry," Yuuki said, bowing his head to where he had just told him why Kamishiro had left.

"You seem to have a lot of time on your hands," Takai laughed, but his face clouded over at once. It was unusual to see

A week after Yuuki had closed the café with no explanation, Takai had heard that Kamishiro-kun had left. He stopped by early one morning to express his concern.

When Yuuki told him that Kamishiro had quit, Takai's smile froze on Takai's face.

"But why—?" he started to say. He seemed so concerned that Yuuki almost had to laugh.

One week wasn't nearly enough time to heal. Somehow Yuuki had managed things. He was trying to pick up and run the café like he always had, before Kamishiro came into the picture. But his gloomy face was the real tale.

As if to scold himself for forgetting to smile, Yuuki slapped himself with the palm of his hand.

"What's that for?" Takai asked with surprise.

"Sorry. Just waking myself up."

Just like he thought, he had forgotten how to

smile. The artificial cheer on his own face was reflected in Takai's stiff, painted on expression.

"His name came to me a long time after the fact. I can't remember any of the other members of the expedition, but the severity of his wound.

"I should have recognized his name as well," Yuuki said quietly.

Kamishiro's name had been on Tsukada's itinerary. Before the ascent, he'd given a copy to Takai and Yuuki. Takai still had his copy. Yuuki had burned his. He didn't want to touch anything connected with Tsukada's death.

"When I think about it now, I can't remember him giving you a copy of any other itinerary. He must have had some kind of premonition," Takai said.

"That's not it. I suggested that we go together sometime, so he probably thought I had some interest in it."

A lot of mountain climbers just warned it from the start, but Tsukada always filed a detailed itinerary with the local police. Takai, an mountaineering outfit in his own right, was also informed. Sometimes Tsukada even told his parents.

"He did it that way so you wouldn't worry, Sano-kun."

"Eh?"

"Lists of people to contact in case of emergency and stuff like that would just keep you up nights, right?"

"I guess so..."

The itinerary included the names and addresses

the members of the expedition, plus the climbing gear, task assignments, equipment, and expenses also included. If the situation arose, Takai was listed as emergency contact. As Kamishiro's employer, this made sense, and now that Yuuki thought about it, he was sure his name hadn't been listed.

If the police or a mountain rescue team had ever located him, Yuuki's heart would have stopped on the spot. Yuuki pictured himself gripping the phone, sweat dripping down his face. He had lived through the days leading up to his following Tsukada's accident in a panic. Remembering it now brought a cynical smile to his lips.

"That time when you were out shopping I asked Kamishiro about it. He only confirmed my suspicions and said nothing else. From that, I figured that he hadn't mentioned you."

"He's been the same with me," Yuuki admitted. When I press him for more information, he only says true, and that's that."

He says Yuuki couldn't even bring himself to use the past tense. Lingering regrets tugged at his chest strings whenever he looked at the empty kitchen.

By the way, I heard from your friend Suzutani," he said, changing the subject. "He was at a nearby job and came in to buy a plastic tarp. I swear the subject he came up in idle conversation, but Kamishiro-kun really did suffer a compound break of his leg, though he says it's healed pretty well."

"That's okay. Really. He's not around any more, is he?"

Takai bowed several times, and Yuuki found

himself feeling sorry for him.

"How about a refill?" he asked, holding up the coffee pot. With a soft smile, Yuuki took his empty cup.

"Your coffee sure is good, Sano-kun."

"It's the only thing I can do well."

"Oh, I don't know about that. But Kamishiro's java is pretty bad, and that day was no improvement. When Kamishiro offered me a cup, I didn't know what to say. Luckily, you returned just then."

"Really?"

So Takai had hated Kamishiro's coffee? Yuuki couldn't help smiling at the absurdity of the whole situation.

"Sano-kun?"

"Oh, sorry. It's nothing."

It was funny, though. Kamishiro had studied the culinary arts for more than ten years. His palate and technique honed to a fine degree. And yet he couldn't make a decent cup of coffee. Well, Kamishiro didn't smoke, so he probably wasn't interested in coffee either. Yuuki wondered if Kamishiro kept his distance from such temptations because they dulled his taste buds.

Yuuki hadn't smiled in a long time. When Kamishiro was still here, he smiled constantly, whether they were working together during the day or embracing each other at night.

Kamishiro often asked Yuuki about the foods he liked, but Yuuki had never questioned him in return. They didn't go out drinking together, and Kamishiro never volunteered any information about his family or his past.

Discovering the differences between Kamishiro and Isakada was frightening to Yuuki. *This is different. This is different.* He noticed such things, and yet had remained peaceful in Kamishiro's arms. It simply made no sense to him whatsoever.

His assumptions had blinded him to the real Isakada.

I didn't see what I wasn't looking for, he muttered to himself, a grin twitching his lips. Tears welled up in his eyes, but he put them down to laughter. Takai did his best not to notice.

"Well, I'd better be on my way," he said, picking up

"Sorry I didn't get around to making you something to eat," Yuuki apologized.

"That's okay. When Kamishiro-kun gets back, I'll show up expecting a banquet. Sayaka is dying for a bit of that chicken fried rice with the egg on top. When he gets to make it, the egg always ends up hard-boiled."

Yuuki waved good-bye as Takai left the cafe. He wouldn't tell him the truth about why Kamishiro had left. But would Takai view the whole affair?

Yuuki lifted his ponytail off his neck and sighed. Only Takai's money, which Yuuki had intended to use, was sitting there on the counter.

Sorry, Sayaka-chan. The guy who makes the chicken fried rice isn't here anymore.

Yuuki's hair had grown out a little since Kamishiro had left. But it could grow down to his knees. He'd still be alone. He'd always be alone. Yuuki should cut it, what with all the split ends, but

he never managed to follow through. He wasn't sure himself about why he needed to drag him along with him. Was he just sentimental?

"I'll cut it tomorrow," Yuuki vowed to himself.

He said the same thing yesterday, and would probably say the same thing tomorrow. He grabbed a lock of his hair and sniffed it. It smelled like Kamishiro's hair, but of course it would. They both used the same shampoo.

Chapter 8

Yuuki spent most of the day sitting on the stool at the end of the counter, aimlessly looking at the local newspaper. Feeling completely listless, he didn't even bother to light up the kitchen stove. The café felt dark and cold. Even with the heater on, he had to wear a jacket.

He looked out the window and sighed. Just one more thing to live with. It had started snowing in the second week of October, and there was already almost a centimeter of snow on the ground. When Yuuki thought of the long winter to come, the café felt even colder.

Last year around this time, Yuuki had been alone, and Shin dropped by on a regular basis, but only to grab a drink and crash for the night.

Even if Shin were to drop by now, though that was highly unlikely, Yuuki could hardly treat him to anything. He did a quick mental inventory of the kitchen and sighed. There wasn't enough there to run a regular household, let alone stock a café. When Shin was no left, Fuuka's menu went with him.

After having Kamishiro's cooking, Yuuki didn't even feel inclined to take over the kitchen in his place. When he explained this to customers, they invariably agreed with him.

The fact was, in his heart of hearts, Yuuki didn't want to do much of anything. He wanted to say

that Kamishiro had been a healing presence for him, but during all the times they had slept together Yuuki was only trying to forget about the past. Dimly aware of how he was using Kamishiro, he had let himself be pampered and indulged for months.

How could Yuuki have known then that he would wind up hating him? All that remained of their relationship was the unappetizing taste of remorse, a deep thorn eternally stuck in his side. This was not simply a problem of the heart. His business had taken off precipitously. Opening the café every morning was becoming a gigantic pain.

He needed to make money, but his expenses just kept mounting. He was even getting behind on payments for the stove that he'd purchased with Kamishiro.

"A good thing I didn't buy the reach-in refrigerator."

The refrigerator in the middle of the kitchen was the same old household appliance that his grandmother had used. He was tired of the thing, and had aimed to replace it sooner or later. Now he was grateful he hadn't made the investment.

Maybe he should just sell everything. But finding a second-hand dealer in a place like this, where new business ventures were as rare as hen's teeth, would be awfully tough.

The best of times, the worst of times. Six of one, half-dozen of the other. That's what it came down to. Yuuki felt depressed whenever he thought of the time he had spent with Kamishiro.

He turned a page of the newspaper and saw an

about another mountain accident. Every year, articles were tucked into a few columns in the local newspaper. Today they were about hikers who had fallen ill on their climb, or hikers who strayed from the trails and froze to death. Tsukada's case was a bit different. Dying in an avalanche was very uncommon, Takai said.

Yuuki scanned the article, recalling those three years of agony when he had desperately prayed that Tsukada would turn up alive. Back then, Yuuki didn't even turn on the television or open a newspaper. He waited for news from Takai.

But he had no use for such memories. Hiring anybody who wanted a view of those mountains had been his first mistake. Yuuki glanced around the café. His eyes rested on the kitchen, but he was looking for something that just wasn't there.

"No customers again," he muttered. "Guess I'll just look up."

The world outside was bright with fallen snow. The sun made the droplets of water on the window sparkle like diamonds. Yuuki just stood there, stretching his legs in the view. He hadn't seen his parents for a while. Maybe he should drop everything and pay them a visit. Just as he was working out the details in his head, the shadow darkened the doorstep.

Yuuki flinched. Was it Kamishiro?

The bell above the door rang as the door opened. The shadow turned out to be only a young woman bringing a padded winter jacket.

"W-welcome," Yuuki squeaked out in a high voice that surprised himself.

Why did these neighborhood girls make him so uptight? It didn't help that he had thought she was Kamishiro, but she also looked a bit strange with a scarf wrapped around her neck and over her mouth.

He glanced down at her legs and smiled. Though the temperature was low enough to turn her nose red, her legs were completely bare. Yuuki started to make some witty comment, and then thought better of it. She might accuse him of sexual harassment, so he held his tongue.

"Long time, no see," he finally said. "What are you doing out of school at this time of day?"

"We had exams, so I got out early," she said.

He smiled kindly at her and turned up the thermostat. She nodded and sat at the counter.

"I'll take a strawberry sundae," she said.

"It's cold today. You should have a warm drink first," Yuuki urged. "It'll be my treat."

"That's okay. Michiko wants her sundae," she said, referring to herself in the third person.

Yuuki had completely forgotten that her name was Michiko. She was a good customer. A long-time resident of the neighborhood. Yet Yuuki couldn't even know her name, though they certainly saw each other enough to be on a first-name basis.

"Michiko-chan, you're not wearing makeup today."

"Nope. My foundation always rubs off on this scarf."

She heaved a great sigh and slowly unwound her scarf. The face that appeared had a cherry red nose and flushed cheeks.

She hasn't changed a bit, Yuuki thought, remembering when she used to build igloos in the vacant lot next door.

"Hurry up with the sundae," Michiko whined. She looked very depressed today for some reason. He dispensed with his usual conversation-starter: "Have you come by yourself today?" Since she wasn't wearing gloves, she rubbed her frozen hands against her thighs, trying to warm up.

Yuuki put the teapot on the stove.

"I said I wanted a sundae," she said dully.

"I'm making myself something to drink first. Would a nice cup of cocoa?"

"Okay."

The strange sound of rubbing flesh continued. He found himself, to his great surprise, drawn to the source of the sound. She noticed him gazing at her legs.

"What?" she snapped.

"Nothing. You just seem pretty cold."

"I'm okay. See?" she said, flipping up her skirt.

He quickly looked away, but an image of navy blue stockings flashed across his senses.

"When it's this cold outside, I wear a *haramaki* around my middle."

"Oh. Of course," Yuuki nodded.

What an eccentric girl, Yuuki thought with a smile. It didn't really matter what she wrapped around her middle. Her exposed legs would still freeze in this cold.

He made two large mugs of cocoa and placed them in front of her.

"Thanks," she said, pouting her pink lips.

Even though she claimed to be wearing no makeup, Michiko had applied a generous amount "stay put" lipstick. Yuuki didn't feel like criticizing her about it, though.

She grasped the mug with both hands and took a sip. The scalding liquid made her grimace at first, but she just blew on it a little and guzzled it down. She kept on holding the warm cup, even after the chocolate was gone. So she really had been cold.

"Still want that sundae?"

"Nah. I'm good," she said brightly.

For a moment she seemed to be her normal self again, but abruptly sank back into silence. Yuuki suddenly remembered something and went to the cash register. He took four ten-yen coins from the register and set them beside her.

"You never got your change from that night. Neither did your friend."

Michiko went a little pale.

Oh, you shouldn't have, Yuuki expected her to say. But when she finally spoke, her voice was barely a whisper.

"Uh, Yuuki-chan?" she began, looking uncomfortable.

"Yeah?"

"Are you and Kamishiro-san, uh, going steady?"

The *san* at the end of Kamishiro's name sounded almost too formal, like she was forcing herself to say it. That night must have really lowered his worth in her

Yuuki felt like he needed to defend his reputation.

"Guess that's one way to put it," he said quietly.

But he's not around anymore. Did he quit?"

"Yeah."

Of course. That was it. She had a crush on *Shiro*. No wonder she showed up here looking so sad. Bittersweet memories of being with Kamishiro floated through Yuuki's mind.

"Sorry, Michiko-chan, but Kamishiro probably got the back. So..."

Now it all made sense. Poor Michiko was enduring the pangs of unrequited love.

And so are you, Yuuki told himself, feeling depressed again.

"No, it's not that," Michiko said, as if reading his mind.

If she hadn't interrupted, his confusion would have eventually vanished, along with the rest of his unfinished sentence. Now Yuuki's submerged emotions broke to the surface.

"The person I've always been in love with is..." Michiko said dramatically.

"What?" Yuuki gasped.

Had she felt this way when Kamishiro was here? Was she switching to her backup, now that the chef was gone? Though Michiko looked sincere, Yuuki was having a hard time taking her seriously.

"I'm telling you, it's not that!" she insisted. She hopped off the stool and stamped her feet like a little girl. Yuuki could only stare at her.

"Yeah, sure, Kamishiro-san is cute," she

admitted. "But I've always had a thing for you. Now everything feels weird between us. That's why I haven't stopped by."

So Michiko had completely bought into Shiro's version of events. If he wanted to, Yuuki could pass the whole thing off as a joke.

"I'm sorry," he said, reaching for her mug. "More cocoa?"

She shook her head, then looked at him with sympathy.

"Don't worry, Yuuki-chan. I haven't told anybody. Not even my friends. So . . ."

So say you'll go out with me. Was that what she was trying to imply? Leaving her alone in a room hadn't turned her into a child, but she did seem a little desperate.

"So *now* do you understand? Do you?" she suddenly cried, tears streaming down her face.

Yuuki wanted to scream along with her. Right now, he would happily cast aside his stubborn pride and beg Kamishiro to come back.

"I'm sorry, Michiko-chan. It's my fault, too."

"Your fault?"

"I chased him away. Now I'm so lonely. I don't know what to do with myself. I don't seem to give a damn about anything."

And that's why I can't go out with you. Such a calculating reply made him sick to his stomach. So lonely he didn't know what to do with himself. How smarmy could he get? He was secretly longing for Kamishiro to return, though he probably never would.

"Yuuki-chan . . ."

He glanced away, unable to look at her tearful face. The phone rang. Debating whether to pick it up or not, Yuuki finally grabbed the receiver.

"Sano-kun!" Takai said loudly at the other end.

The sound of his tense voice reminded Yuuki of a nightmare day when he heard the news about Sano. His legs began to tremble.

Takai wasn't brimming over with good news, but he detected echoes of enthusiasm, even joy.

"I heard that Kamishiro is climbing Asahidake himself."

"What?"

My wife's been watching the store lately. According to her, a guy that matches Kamishiro's description came in to buy camping fuel. He was there an hour ago, so you might still catch him!"

Yuuki glanced out the window. *Kamishiro was in the neighborhood? And he's going to climb the mountain in the middle of the morning?*

Isukada had always set out before dawn, not in odd hours between breakfast and lunch. He would wake Yuuki awake and say, "I just want to see your face before I leave." Then he would shower grumpy Yuuki with kisses and take off.

It was just common sense to start a climb early in the morning. What did Kamishiro intend to do at this ridiculously late hour? Even Takai had his doubts about Kamishiro's apparent plans. Setting off for the Daisetsu at this time of day was just plain stupid.

Yuuki had no time to waste, and flew out of the café.

"Yuuki-chan!" Michiko cried, but he didn't look back.

He couldn't look up the cafe with customers sitting there, but he didn't have time to worry about that now. He jumped into his car and turned the key with shaking hand. Then he jammed the accelerator to the floor, and zoomed away.

"Takai-san!"

"Ah, you're here."

Takai had been anxiously waiting for Yuuki to arrive. He stood next to an SUV with his store logo stenciled on the side. The snow at his feet was packed down from all his pacing around in his boots. He looked like a runner just before a race.

"We'll take my car," Takai said briskly. "Yours would get stuck before we even reach the mountain."

Yuuki parked his car in the store lot and climbed into the passenger seat.

"I can't believe this!" Yuuki said, sounding upset. "Your wife noticed that the guy had a bimble. Why didn't she contact me?"

Takai's warm smile was quickly replaced by a fierce expression. Cursing his wife under his breath, he leaned on the horn as the car ahead slowed down to crawl.

"T-Takai-san. Be careful," Yuuki warned, nervous about the icy road.

"If we don't make it in time, then what?" Takai asked.



He had also been scarred by Tsukada's death, and was gripping the steering wheel with white knuckles. Yuuki knew Takai blamed himself for letting Tsukada climb the mountain that day. And now his memories of that lost life were shrouded in regret.

"Takai-san?" Yuuki said softly.

"Hmm?"

"Kamishiro san is a lot like Tsukada san is he?"

Even if there was no one to blame, Yuuki cursed the good weather that had inspired Tsukada to climb the mountain. Why didn't he stop him? And why didn't he go with him?

Yuuki never had the chance to see Tsukada's frozen body buried in the snow. He never had the chance to say the things he needed to say. Yet he desperately wanted Tsukada to come back and heal his wounds. He still wanted to find salvation in Tsukada's arms. He had looked for Tsukada's shadow in Kamishiro's soul, and then clung to those foolish desires.

Takai was also chasing Tsukada's ghost as he kept on driving. They had to stop Kamishiro from climbing the mountain. But would they be too late?

"You're right, Sano-kun. Kamishiro-san is a lot like Tsukada," Takai agreed.

"The way he smiles. The way he talks." Yuuki pointed out.

And the way he holds me. Yuuki thought. He was in no mood for history to repeat itself. They had to make it in time to stop him. Yuuki clenched his fists on his knees and said a silent prayer.

Suddenly they hit a traffic light, and Takai tapped on the brakes. He turned to look at Yuuki and took a deep breath.

"But, Sano-kun. Have you forgotten what Tsukada looks like?" he said gently.

"Of course not, Takai-san."

"Maybe their height and coloring are similar, but not their eyes," Takai declared.

"What do you mean?" Yuuki wanted to know.

Takai rested his head against the steering wheel, looking perplexed.

"Did you fall in love with him because he looks like Tsukada san?" he asked gently.

"I fell in love?" Yuuki gasped, blood rushing to his cheeks.

So Takai *had* noticed. Had Yuuki really been that foolish?

"But, uh, I mean, don't you think they look alike?" Yuuki stammered.

"Not really. Why don't you point out their similarities," Takai suggested with a smile. The tension in his voice was finally beginning to fade.

Suddenly the guy behind him beeped his horn.

"Okay, okay," he grumbled, stepping on the gas. Takai started to drive more cautiously.

What happened to all that adrenaline? Yuuki wondered. They would never get there at this rate. Takai dialed Yuuki his cell phone.

"The visitor's center is on speed-dial. My head's been spinning so fast, I completely forgot."

"Will he even stop there?" Yuuki asked.

"He's supposed to sign a statement before he climbs the mountain. Tell them to make a few more stops by."

"Got it," Yuuki said, fumbling with the unfamiliar phone. For some stupid reason, he kept ending back in the address book. The first name under "T" was Tsukada.

His full name wasn't listed, only "Tsukada-kun," how Takai had always addressed him. Yuuki wondered if Tsukada had ever seen his name on the list. Probably not.

"Just my first name or my last name, okay?" Tsukada always said, usually with a pissed-off expression on his face.

"So you really don't think they look alike?" Yuuki asked.

"Nope," Takai said, shaking his head.

Yuuki closed his eyes and chased the two men through his thoughts. Both of them had sun-baked skin. Pink, healthy cheeks. Snow-white teeth that made them look years younger.

In fact, Tsukada's baby face often made him look as young as Yuuki, which he teased him mercilessly about. Even Tsukada admitted there was a stark contrast between his muscular body and everything from the neck up.

He really didn't resemble Kamishiro at all, did he? After all, the corners of their eyes both crinkled when they smiled.

"Sano-kun, what are you doing? Hurry and make that call!" Takai urged.

But Yuuki kept his eyes closed, dreaming of Kamishiro. His untamed hair that framed his strong face. If anything, a stranger might mistake him for someone in his late thirties. Kamishiro's long, delicate ears and neatly-trimmed nails were nothing like Tsukada's stubby ones.

What in the world am I doing? Yuuki suddenly thought.

Now he understood. He didn't fall in love with Kamishiro because he looked like Tsukada. He fell in love with Kamishiro...because he looked like Kamishiro. Or was that just another one of his lame excuses? Did Kamishiro embrace him with a guilty conscience?

A thought suddenly lit up Yuuki's head like a lightning bolt. If he was Kamishiro right now, where would he go? Yuuki thought he knew the answer, though he didn't be sure.

"Takai san!" he shouted.

"Yeah?" Takai muttered, preoccupied with the dead.

"Risshou Temple!"

Risshou Temple? You mean where Tsukada—"

"Yep. That's where he's headed," Yuuki declared, pointing straight ahead. Not many people visited gravesites here every year, when the temple grounds were covered in snow. It was just too hard to get through.

But that wouldn't stop Kamishiro. He wouldn't stop the mountain until he had paid his respects to Sano.

"Okay. Got it," Takai said. He instantly made a

sharp U-turn and was greeted by a chorus of honking horns. Takai rolled down his window and politely bowed his head to the angry drivers, and then took off.

"That idiot!" he yelled, talking about Kamishiro.

But Yuuki wondered in his heart which one of them was truly the idiot. Glancing down at his cell phone, he saw that the screen had already gone dark. Tsukada's name disappeared from view.

Chapter 9

They ended up going in the opposite direction to the base of the Daisetsu Range. The new cemetery occupied a broad swath of land on the outskirts of the city.

One day soon after it was finished, Yuuki and Tsukada had passed by it.

"Looks like a typical bedroom community," Tsukada had snorted.

He certainly never dreamed that he would be staying there one day.

It was summer back then, and the plots were landscaped like a miniature city. Now the miniature city looked abandoned.

The roads that bisected the blocks of cemetery plots had been plowed, but the gravestones were still blanketed with snow. It didn't really matter, since most people never visited here in winter.

Takai drove back and forth along the same road, unable to pick out landmarks. His driving grew more erratic, but Yuuki didn't worry as the car careened back and forth. He kept his eyes peeled for signs of Kamishiro, usually noticing when the car skidded sideways or when it jumped the curb.

Damn it! He's got to be around here somewhere.

Suddenly the tires got stuck and spun around, making a whining noise. Takai slammed into reverse

and finally managed to get them going again. He was sighing with relief when Yuuki pointed at something on the opposite side.

"Takai-san!"

Takai swung around to look. A man in a bright blue jacket was walking between the gravestones. Yuuki jumped out of the moving car, not even waiting for Takai to stop.

"Sano-kun!" Takai gasped.

Yuuki slipped and tumbled to the ground, but the snow cushioned his fall. He brushed off his arms and legs and hurried toward Kamishiro.

"Kamishiro-san! Kamishiro-san!" Yuuki shouted, following the trail of footsteps leading to Tsukada's grave. The snow proved to be softer than Yuuki expected, and his legs sank up to his calves. His shoes immediately felt cold and wet, but he didn't care.

"Kamishiro-san!"

Based on what he was wearing, the man could have been just another out-of-town tourist, but he wasn't carrying skis or a snowboard. A large backpack sat at his feet, a pair of crampons dangling from the frame.

Was the idiot planning to spend the night on that mountain, on that leg, in the middle of winter? The relaxed look on Kamishiro's face pissed Yuuki off for some reason.

"You bloody fool!" he shrieked. He scooped up a handful of snow, smashed it into a ball, and flung it at Kamishiro.

"Hey!" the chef shouted.

"You stupid ass!" Yuuki yelled back.

He trudged toward Kamishiro, pelting him with snowballs along the way. Kamishiro didn't even try to block. The snow balls bounced off his waterproof jacket, flew apart, and fell to the ground.

"What the hell were you thinking?" Yuuki hissed.

His footprints would vanish with the next snowfall, but what about the harsh words he kept throwing at Kamishiro? Yuuki suddenly stopped and rubbed his head, staring at the ground. The angry tone of his voice was staining the snow black, but he didn't seem able to stop.

"Idiot," he muttered, as cold seeped into his body. He even couldn't move his frozen fingertips. His ragged breath released a plume of white smoke, quickly whisked away by the wind.

"Kamishiro-san!"

As Yuuki called out his name, he wondered if it was even his place to tell Kamishiro not to go. Did he have the right to beg him to come home?

"Y-Yuuki-san," Kamishiro finally said in a shaky voice.

Yuuki trembled when he heard his name. As white-hot anger left his body, the winter cold set in, giving him goosebumps all over.

"So you figured I'd be here," Kamishiro said calmly, like he was talking about the weather. "The office told me where to find Tsukada's grave. But the snow sure got in the way."

The figure gazing at the cloudy sky didn't look

like he was about to tragically brave the unknown. Yuuki quickly realized that he and Takai had been worrying over nothing. Suddenly he saw an envelope placed like an offering in front of the gravestone.

"But that's—" he started to say.

"Yes," Kamishiro nodded.

Yuuki's frozen ankles made strange popping sounds as he ran to Kamishiro's side. Kamishiro tried to hold him back, but Yuuki shook him off and picked up the letter.

What did Kamishiro write to a dead man? Yuuki wondered, as he pulled a sheet of paper out of the envelope.

"Kamishiro-san, what is this?"

"Read it and you'll understand."

Yuuki read it and quickly understood. It was a letter to a dead man. It was Kamishiro's official mountain climbing itinerary. He had listed Yuuki's name as his current address and emergency phone number.

"You really are a fool," Yuuki hissed.

"Why?" Kamishiro asked calmly.

"Why did you leave this here, where the snow would cover it? They wouldn't find it until spring! What if you had an accident?"

"I wasn't planning to die up there," Kamishiro said seriously. "But if something did happen, I wanted them to contact you first."

Yuuki was about to call him a fool again, but his anger got caught in his throat. He gripped the paper so tightly that his fingertips turned red.

"No way! There's simply no way!" he snapped.

tear the paper in half.

He wanted to wad it up and bury it under the snow. Instead, he lunged at Kamishiro, clutching the pieces in his hand.

What had made him so angry? What had made him so sad? Though he kept telling himself that Kamishiro was only a substitute for Tsukada, if Yuuki had Kamishiro he'd have nothing left. He didn't care if Kamishiro was climbing the mountain as an act of penance. Yuuki simply didn't want him to go, and he'd do whatever it took to convince Kamishiro to abandon this quest. He would kick, scream, even cry like a little baby, until Kamishiro finally agreed to come back.

"Your hair is a little longer," Kamishiro said, touching it with his hand.

Yuuki pretended that the warm feeling on the top of his head came from Kamishiro's lips. He looked down and wrapped himself in Kamishiro's arms.

"It was all my fault," Kamishiro said quietly, his face full of pain. "If I hadn't gone on ahead, Tsukada would have never come looking for me. He told me that I was drifting off the trail, but I didn't hear him—"

"That's enough," Yuuki whispered.

"I really need to do this. It's my obligation to Tsukada."

Yuuki's body went rigid, but Kamishiro's honesty slowly warmed the cold knot of stubbornness in his chest.

"I hated feeling like a substitute every time I held you in my arms," Kamishiro admitted. "Every time

I saw you looking for Tsukada inside me, I realized more and more that I was turning into Shin."

"Turning into Shin?" Yuuki gasped with surprise.

Kamishiro cupped Yuuki's face in both hands, and tilted up his head. Now they were looking into each other's eyes.

"I didn't have the right to ask you to forget about Tsukada," Kamishiro said. "Yet every time we slept together I heard three words over and over in my head. Forget about him, forget about him."

"You're wrong, Kamishiro-san," Yuuki whispered. He stood on tiptoe and threw his arms around Kamishiro's neck. Their cold lips pressed together and soon their tongues entwined in a fevered dance. Hot air flowed out of Yuuki's lungs and spilled into Kamishiro's mouth.

Kamishiro's cheeks felt icy cold. Just how long had he been out here? Suddenly Yuuki's face

"Sano-kun," Kamishiro moaned.

"Call me Yuuki. Your voice sounds nothing like Tsukada's, by the way. No way will I ever confuse the two of you."

"Yuuki..."

Yuuki had a sudden, upsetting thought. If Yuuki finally got over Tsukada, would Kamishiro have no use for him? As tears welled up in his eyes, he gave Kamishiro a long, hard kiss. His breath grew heated and his body began to burn.

Although the temperature usually rose above zero during the day, once the sun set it plummeted well



below freezing. Just being outside for more than a few minutes was akin to suicide.

So when Yuuki said, "It's cold, let's go home," Kamishiro should have heartily agreed. Turns out he had other plans.

"No, I'll be back tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow?" Yuuki frowned.

Should he be delighted by Kamishiro's prompt reply, or suspicious about the delay? Yuuki looked at Kamishiro's heavy jacket and pack, wondering what was up. Suddenly, it dawned on him: Kamishiro was still going to climb the mountain!

"You must be kidding!" Yuuki cried out.

"We didn't reach the summit that day, remember?" Kamishiro said calmly. "I can't come back to the café until I get to the top on my own."

"But your leg!" Yuuki protested.

"I've been to the doctor. He gave me the go-ahead."

As if to prove it, Kamishiro suddenly let go of Yuuki and marched in place. His legs actually looked more balanced now than when they were lying together. On a day-to-day basis, his progress had been too slight to notice. But now, one month later, the difference was clearly apparent. Yuuki could hardly believe this was the same man. How did Kamishiro manage to recover so quickly?

"Kamishiro-san, did the doctor actually say you could go mountain climbing?" Yuuki asked cautiously.

"He said that hiking would be no problem."

"Climbing Mt. Asahidake in winter isn't

hiking," Yuuki scoffed.

But he knew Kamishiro had already made up his mind. After all, Kamishiro had quit a good job and Yuuki and work in his café. He wouldn't give up his quest at this point. Trying to ignore his own shortcomings, Yuuki stared at Kamishiro, wondering how to deal with him.

Just then, they heard a crunch in the snow behind them. Takai cleared his throat in an obvious manner.

"Ahem! Just wanted to make sure you didn't forget about me."

Yuuki turned around with surprise. Takai was standing there, looking at his feet. Yuuki had completely forgotten about him.

"Ah, um, sorry," he apologized. His cheeks were flushing, not entirely from the cold.

"Whatever. At my age, nothing surprises me anymore," Takai shrugged.

Kamishiro just nodded. Though Yuuki's back had been turned to Takai, Kamishiro had seen him standing and felt no embarrassment whatsoever.

Doesn't he ever feel self-conscious? Yuuki thought, remembering how Kamishiro had completely crossed in front of him that very first day. Aside from looking the man could be a bit dense.

Even more than his stubbornness, Kamishiro's difference really got to Yuuki. He jumped away from Kamishiro, not before giving him a sharp elbow in the back.

"Ooof!" Kamishiro groaned, doubling over.

"So you plan to climb that mountain no matter

what, huh?" Takai asked.

"Yes," Kamishiro said resolutely.

"You've got to stop him, Takai-san!" Yuuki begged.

"I can't talk sense into someone craving to climb that thing," Takai sighed. He was himself a genuine mountain climbing fool. Tsukada once said that Takai had opened the store to feed his addiction.

Yuuki stood there with a pounding heart, hoping that Takai would reconsider. But Takai just stood there with his arms crossed, staring vacantly into space. Suddenly he glanced down at Kamishiro's bundle and then visually checked out the equipment stored to his pack.

"Takai," Yuuki said anxiously, unsure of what to say next.

"Just a minute," Takai said, taking out his cell phone. He quickly made a call and got someone on the line.

"Hello, Hirasaka-san? You available tomorrow? Great. Consider yourself booked. I have a guy going to Asahidake and back. Call the weather bureau and get a report."

Then Takai hung up, looking quite pleased with himself. He wasn't going to try and stop Kamishiro. Yuuki knew, but at least he could give him some company on the way up.

"Since we're slapping this thing together, let's go back and get ready," Takai suggested, starting to walk toward his SUV.

"Go back where?" Kamishiro asked, looking puzzled.

"This tour package includes a trail guide," Takai, looking businesslike. "You can stay at my house. I'll take care of the remaining stuff tonight."

"But everything I need is right here," Kamishiro insisted, pointing to his pack.

"You may be prepared to scale that mountain, but I'm not."

"We?"

Yuuki and Kamishiro exchanged glances. Just what did Takai have in mind?

"Hirasaka-kun and I will be your support team. We can do the whole thing in a day if we take the tram to Sugami first, and then return while it's still running. Heck, we'll probably be home in time for dinner."

But despite this clever workaround, the trip would still be exhausting, Takai explained. They definitely needed some high-calorie food in their packs.

As Yuuki and Kamishiro gaped at him, Takai held out his hand.

"If we can put it together quickly, we can spend the night at the Asahidake Hot Springs. They say soaking in them is good for the bones."

Takai obviously regarded this trek as just a leisure stroll on a winter's day. He seemed so totally relaxed. Yuuki quickly convinced himself that he should go along.

"Takai-san! Count me in!"

"What?"

"Let's all climb the mountain together!" Yuuki insisted.

Though Tsukada had invited him on so many

occasions, Yuuki had never actually been climbing. He had only waited for Tsukada, never doubting that he would return. But Yuuki wasn't going just for the fun of it.

Ever since that fateful day, that mountain had occupied his thoughts. So close—and yet so far away. Even though he had often read about climbing accidents, they had never seemed real to Yuuki. But Tsukada's death. Now he couldn't stand to wait even a single day for Kamishiro to return.

"The tram goes halfway up the mountain, right? I should be able to do this. Take me with you," he begged Takai.

"Sano-kun. You can't take a mountain for granted, especially in winter."

Takai smiled faintly, but there was no laughter in his eyes. He sounded like a man with deep knowledge of the mountains, which he was, of course.

"The weather can turn bad in an instant," he went on. "In any case, this deep snow pack will make the going treacherous. Climbing a mountain is risky, and you're not exactly a *he man*, Sano-kun. Kamishiro's an experienced climber, but he'll still need a lot of help. Add an amateur like you to the mix, and things could get really dicey."

Though Takai's tone was gentle, he clearly didn't want to carry any more burdens up that hill. Yuuki had nothing to say. Takai was right, after all. If he tagged along, he'd only be a ball and chain.

"Well, let's go," Takai said.

Kamishiro hoisted his heavy pack. Just the

weight needed to scale a mountain in winter would be more than Yuuki could even carry.

He stared at each step that Kamishiro took, trying to convince himself that everything would be okay. But he kept help noticing that Kamishiro still listed slightly to the right.

"Don't worry so much," Takai said, kindly patting him on the back. "You can see for yourself that everything is doing fine."

Yuuki felt a little calmer, but not much.

"I appreciate all that you're doing for him," he said in a faint tone, feeling a little embarrassed.

Takai nodded and touched Yuuki's hand.

"Let me see that," he said.

Yuuki realized that he was still holding Kamishiro's torn itinerary. He handed the two pieces to Takai.

"Yes, indeed," Takai said as he scanned the information.

"Is something strange about it?" Yuuki asked, sounding a little nervous. His name, after all, was listed as Kamishiro's emergency contact. What would Takai say about that? Evidently he didn't even notice.

"No, not really," Takai said. "It's just a normal itinerary."

But suddenly he frowned.

"Takai-san?" Yuuki asked with concern.

"It's just that I share some of the blame here as well. Sometimes I just lose track of things, and they fall behind schedule."

Yuuki finally realized that he was referring

to Tsukada's accident. The expedition set out in the early morning, and met with disaster when it was still daylight. But Takai didn't call Yuuki until it was already dark outside.

But Takai now seemed to understand how Yuuki had felt. Though he didn't hear about Tsukada's death until evening, Yuuki still blamed him for spending the day in blissful ignorance.

"Deciding who should be contacted first is a tough call to make," Takai went on.

Especially if your lover is a man, Yuuki thought. Takai folded his arms and looked thoughtful.

"What does your wife think?" asked Yuuki.

"Huh?"

"Doesn't all this waiting worry her?"

"Not really," Takai admitted. "She's rather indifferent to it all."

"That can't be true," Yuuki said in a small voice.

"Maybe not," Takai agreed. "Back in the day they called me the god of the Daisetsu Range. That's why I decided to sign on this time around."

"Sorry to tell you this, Takai-san," Yuuki said with a grin. "But Tsukada used to call you the monkey of the Daisetsu Range."

"Oh, really?" Takai huffed.

Grateful for their frank talk, Yuuki took off after Kamishiro, who was briskly moving toward the car. Despite his heavy pack, he barreled through the snowdrifts like a sled dog.

"For crying out loud! Will you two get a move

he shouted to the others.

"He'd better not mouth off like that when we're on the mountain," Takai grumbled.

Yuuki just laughed.

Chapter 10

"Order for table two."

"Got it."

As Kamishiro passed the steaming plate to Yuuki, their fingers touched for a moment. Yuuki's heart suddenly skipped a beat.

Just calm down, he told himself. We have work to do.

Though two months had passed since Kamishiro's return, Yuuki still got excited every time he looked at him. He was barely able to control his blushing when they ran the café together.

True to his word, Kamishiro had climbed the mountain and then returned to the café. On the day of his return, Yuuki had gone to Takai's store to see the three of them off, then spent the rest of the day worrying. As the sun started to set, Yuuki suddenly heard someone at the door.

"Yuuki? I'm back," Kamishiro said, his cheeks flushed by the cold air. Yuuki would never forget that moment. It was now fixed forever in his memory.

Yuuki wanted to wrap his arms around him, to hug him with kisses, seek out the warmth of his skin. But though Kamishiro had reached closure with a part of his life, he simply wasn't ready to resume a deeper relationship.

The New Year had come and gone. Though the climb had been only two months ago, it seemed like years to Yuuki. Soon their old customers started coming back in droves, and their days grew very busy.

Now and then, like an airplane hitting an air pocket, business would drop off for a while. Yuuki would crank up the background music, trying to fill the silence. Or he'd go shopping, even if he had nothing to buy. His desperate efforts to cope must have made Kamishiro.

But despite everything, Yuuki was still happy they were living together again. He was no longer a prisoner of past. In fact, his days had even been as peaceful and happy as they were now.

Except for one thing. He just couldn't seem to control his lust for Kamishiro. It didn't take much to get him going. Their eyes would meet at some odd moment or their hands would brush together. Almost instantly, Yuuki's heart would throb with all the anxieties of a first love.

"Yuuki, table one needs their tab."

"Right."

Yuuki was about to pour himself a cup of tea, but he hurried over to the register. Another satisfied customer was waiting to pay his bill. Yuuki leaned from ear to ear, sharing in Kamishiro's accomplishment as if it was his own.

"Thanks for coming in!" he said enthusiastically.

This display of high spirits made the man smile. Every day, Kamishiro teased Yuuki about his good mood.

You could put me in an even better mood, Yuuki smirked to himself, but he didn't dare tell Kamishiro.

He went back to fill his cup, but accidentally poured too much hot water into it. Looking at Kamishiro, he spilled the overflow into the sink.

"Better watch out. You'll burn yourself," Kamishiro teased.

Yuuki sighed. His burning desire for Kamishiro never went away, even though he "took care of himself" every night with his own hand. Why couldn't they just keep together again? Was Kamishiro having a hard time,

This time around, their feet seemed to be planted in concrete. Breaking free would be tough, despite their previous physical relationship.

Since Kamishiro had returned from the mountain, Yuuki hadn't slept in his arms even once. Though Kamishiro had made his atonement to Tsukada, he still wasn't able to share his feelings about sleeping with Yuuki.

Despite Yuuki's impatience, he sensed that Kamishiro truly enjoyed his life out here in the sticks. Every night, after a long soak in the bath, he headed out for his room. Every morning, he got up at dawn to play in the snow with the neighborhood dog.

On the surface, they were just roommates now. They said "good mornings" and "good nights" to each other but only suggested nothing more.

But Yuuki still wished they could spend more time together after work. Maybe he could suggest that

they have sex just for something else to do... to keep each other warm, etc., etc. He had spent the last two months fantasizing about what to say, how to break the ice, but never followed through. Just then the door opened.

"Welcome," Kamishiro called out. "Would you like to sit at the counter?"

Yuuki turned around and saw his old friend Shin.

"So you finally cut your hair," Shin said.

"Yeah. I'm just going back to the way it was," Yuuki admitted, hanging his head.

They hadn't seen each other for ages. Shin kept staring at Yuuki's new hairstyle, making him feel self-conscious.

"I'm transferring to Honshu," he said suddenly. "The general contractor there took a shine to me, apparently."

There was still a lot of baggage between them, but Yuuki was glad that Shin had come in personally to tell him about the move. It couldn't have been easy for him.

"Uh, sorry about before," Shin said with a shy smile. Yuuki looked him up and down. Had Shin put on a few pounds?

They continued their awkward conversation, going out of their way to be polite to each other. When Shin finally stood up to leave, Yuuki felt relieved.

"I'll be back for *O-Bon*. Let's have a drink together then," Shin said graciously, heading for the door. Suddenly he turned around to look at Yuuki.

"It's a good thing we didn't sleep together," he said quietly. "Long-distance relationships never work."

They had known each other for ten years. Would things be different between them now if Kamishiro had ever shown up? Once upon a time, Yuuki had anguished over the possibilities, but now he knew they would never be more than friends.

"I'll be making twice what I've earning now. Guess I'm lucky," Shin shrugged.

It's not just luck. You're a good guy, Yuuki wanted to say, but that would sound too much like a parent giving a child a pat on the back. His face suddenly felt hot and uncomfortable. When Yuuki didn't reply, Shin's face clouded over.

"Sorry. I shouldn't have come here," he sighed.

"Don't say that!" Yuuki protested. "I'm glad you came."

Shin smiled and held out his hand. As Yuuki gently took it, their eyes met for a brief moment. The smiles they exchanged were genuine.

"See you around," Shin said, and then he left.

He always said good-bye like that. Yuuki could almost believe that he would be stopping by tomorrow or the day after. Despite all that had happened between them, maybe a day would come when they could finally be out together without feeling strange. Or so Yuuki hoped. They had been friends for so long. It was a shame to let it all go.

Back in the kitchen, Kamishiro was probably talking about Shin's visit, Yuuki thought. But instead,

his unsociable cook was preparing for the next day.

"What was that all about?" Kamishiro asked casually.

"No big deal," Yuuki muttered. Talking about it wouldn't really change anything.

"Huh?"

"It's nothing important."

Yuuki wore a mask of indifference as he started cleaning the cafe. They managed to end the day without a cross word between them.

"Here's your order."

A sudden rush of customers near closing had kept the cafe open until ten o'clock. The week before, Yuuki had argued that they should take their orders around eight, especially since they didn't serve alcohol.

"Why fence ourselves in with rules and restrictions?" Kamishiro protested. Since they failed to reach a consensus, Yuuki was getting used to working off the clock, though he didn't like it.

"After you finish, go ahead and take a load off," Kamishiro suggested.

"I know that. You don't have to tell me," Yuuki huffed.

Yuuki definitely didn't possess Kamishiro's boundless energy, and had often pointed this out during their "discussions." Their working conditions were different, too. Why wouldn't he be tired running a round like he did all day? Yuuki gave Kamishiro a hard look, but the chef just kept arranging pots and pans.

He still refused to take even a meager salary. One word got around that Kamishiro was back again, and sales had more than doubled.

"I can't pay you what you're worth," Yuuki pleaded, "but at least let me pay you something."

"I'm not working here for the money," Kamishiro said stubbornly.

Yuuki offered to pay him enough to meet the minimum income tax requirements, but Kamishiro still shook his head.

"I'm not really looking for financial reward," he repeated.

As hot water rained down over his head, Yuuki stood in the shower and sighed. He stretched his arms over his head, trying to loosen his tense shoulders. He had spent so much time dragging the past behind him. Maybe it was time to cut his losses and move forward.

"Ahhhh," he said, as the hot water worked its magic.

He had really wanted to take a bath, but was too impatient to fill the tub.

His calves felt as tight as drums. Since he spent every day on his feet, the lower half of his body was a constant source of irritation. He raised one leg and massaged his strained muscles.

"Man, that's stiff," he muttered.

I wonder how Kamishiro's big fingers would feel. The thought popped into his head, striking a flame inside his body.

"Ahh..."

He turned the shower head to one side and stroked the back of his thighs, all the while moaning about Kamishiro's thick, strong arms.

Here...like this...touch me...slowly.

Yuuki moved his hand up between his buttocks and touched that throbbing part of him. His glider twitched and quivered. When would Kamishiro finally enter him again?

The water from the shower head pattered onto the tile, as his stifled gasps echoed off the wall.

"Hmmm," Yuuki moaned, grabbing his hard cock with his other hand.

Those nights of passionate sex seemed so long ago. Yuuki felt pangs of hunger in his neck. But there was no way he could share them with Kamishiro.

"Ah...ahhh...ahhhh..." he panted.

His hole still felt too tight to accept a single finger. Impatiently wiggling his ass, Yuuki massaged his testicles, hoping to hurry things along.

"Damn," he spat out, impatient to finish.

He was standing with his cheek pressed against the shower wall. A strange position, to be sure, but he didn't want to stop stroking himself long enough to move.

"More...more..." he moaned from between his clenched teeth.

Suddenly the bathroom door opened.

"Oh, sorry!" Kamishiro said, hearing the shower running.

"What?" Yuuki gasped.

Kamishiro peered around the door, then quickly moved away when he saw what Yuuki was doing.

"Sorry!" he said again, and then slammed the door.

Blood rushed to Yuuki's head. Kamishiro had seen him like this, and had run away.

"Wait!" Yuuki cried out, running naked down the hallway. Water dripped all over the floor, but he didn't care. He was almost in a state of shock, but he kept on moving.

"Kamishiro-san!" Yuuki said, finally catching up to him. The chef slowly turned around.

"What?" he asked serenely, but his eyes were wandering everywhere.

They both cleared their throats at the same time. Yuuki felt the blood running to his head as their eyes locked together.

Then suddenly, it happened. Without a second thought, Yuuki heaved his naked body against Kamishiro, who was still wearing his chef's smock.

"I didn't hear the shower running, so I..." Kamishiro started to say, but Yuuki's ears were deaf to such excuses.

"Oh, Yuuki..." Kamishiro sighed.

"Kamishiro-san."

Yuuki couldn't stand it any longer. He covered Kamishiro's wet mouth with his own, straining against his painful desire to come on the spot.

Yuuki pushed Kamishiro against the wall and pinned himself against his body. Saliva dribbled from the corner of Kamishiro's mouth and ran down his chin.

Yuuki greedily licked it off with his hot tongue.

Suddenly, without warning, Yuuki's penis spurted like a geyser, though Kamushiro hadn't even touched it.

I can't believe it, Yuuki thought, as his hips jerked and shuddered.

"You..." he moaned, clinging to Kamushiro, grasping his arms. Kamushiro grabbed Yuuki's hands and held them tight. A trail of semen stained his smock and continued down to his jeans, but Kamushiro wasn't complaining.

"Take me," Yuuki begged. "Take me."

He didn't care if Kamushiro was only doing him a favor. That would be more than enough for Yuuki; he wanted Kamushiro more than anything else in the world, but was still too scared to find out if the feeling was mutual.

The first time Kamushiro had the steel inside him, Yuuki had pretended he was Tsukada. Back then, that was what he thought he wanted to feel. Looking at Kamushiro now, standing close enough to feel his breath, Yuuki was still unable to cry out his name. His body quivered with fear and confusion, craving the contact that would wash it all away.

As Yuuki nipped at Kamushiro's neck, he could feel his heartbeat. He fastened his lips to the skin, like he was a vampire sucking blood.

"Son of a bitch!" Kamushiro gasped, scooping Yuuki up in his arms. Yuuki wrapped his legs around his waist, clinging to Kamushiro like a child.

"Son of a bitch!" Kamushiro gasped again.

His rough voice set Yuuki's loins on fire. He had ejaculated minutes ago, but feeling Kamushiro's erection against his groin made Yuuki's cock stand at attention.

Kamushiro carried Yuuki down the hall to his bedroom and kicked the door open. Then he threw him on the futon like a piece of luggage. The sudden pain made Yuuki howl, but it quickly turned into a sweet sobbing as Kamushiro loomed over him.

"Kamushiro-san," Yuuki said, looking straight into his eyes. "Why have you been giving me the brush ever since you came back?"

Yuuki hadn't exactly thrown himself at Kamushiro, either. But he had at least indicated that he was interested.

"I've been wanting you all this time," Yuuki whispered, nibbling on Kamushiro's earlobe.

He felt Kamushiro's hot tongue on the nape of his neck.

"Yuuki..." Kamushiro moaned, as he played with Yuuki's hair. Suddenly he stopped and gave him a moldering look.

"Am I the one you really want?" he asked faintly.

"Yes. Yessssss," Yuuki gasped, his hips quivering. He undid the buttons of Kamushiro's smock with trembling fingers.

"I was worried that you might regret it if we slept together again," Kamushiro explained.

Then why didn't you come right out and say so! Yuuki thought wildly.

But he only flashed a wry smile. Truth be told, they had both felt too intimidated to make the first move.

As they moaned each other's names over and over, their erections grew even harder. Yuuki mounted Kamishiro's jeans and slipped them off, along with his briefs. He caressed Kamishiro's bare buttocks for a moment, and then grabbed his swollen cock.

"Hey!" Kamishiro yelled, but he wasn't objecting.

Yuuki massaged the sensitive tip of Kamishiro's member with the ball of his thumb. Kamishiro frowned his brows and clenched his teeth, trying to hold back. Suddenly Yuuki knelt on the futon and inserted his ass.

"Hurry! Enter me!" he begged, his bottom undulating with desire. "I want you soooo bad, Kamishiro-san."

Kamishiro grabbed Yuuki's thighs, lifted him up, and shoved his erection into him.

"Ahh!" Yuuki cried out, finally feeling that longed-for sensation. His hole pulsed greedily, trying to swallow Kamishiro up.

"Haaa...haaaa...haaaa..." Kamishiro panted, driving his shaft into Yuuki's depths. Yuuki's hips shook in a kind of sweet agony.

Kamishiro's rod kept on exploring, burrowing itself deeper and deeper as Yuuki screamed and groaned.

"Kamishiro-san," he moaned. "Don't stop, don't stop..."

Just then Yuuki felt something erupt inside him.

"Sorry!" Kamishiro gasped with embarrassment.



but Yuuki just grinned. His anal muscles clamped around Kamishiro's drooping member, like they were sad to see him go. All of a sudden, the penis came back to life.

"You're like a kid who can't get enough," Kamishiro teased.

"That's fine by me. As many times as..."

But before Yuuki could finish the sentence, the steel rod inside him began thrusting again, setting his flesh on fire.

As Kamishiro penetrated him deeply, Yuuki felt his eyes fill with tears. Kamishiro had unveiled the depths of his heart, making his desire bubble over. He wanted to quiver with this pleasure all night.

"Ahhh...haaaa...haaaa..." Yuuki moaned, moving his hips gently from side-to-side.

He reached his arms back to Kamishiro as if to say: *Taste me. Devour me. Never let me go.* Suddenly Kamishiro tensed all over.

"Kamishiro-san!" Yuuki screamed, as Kamishiro filled him a second time. He was panting so hard, he felt about to faint. Kamishiro pulled out and turned Yuuki on his back.

"Yuuki," Kamishiro whispered, darting his tongue inside his mouth. Their hot tongues danced together for a while, until they finally came up for air. Though Yuuki's body glowed with pleasure, his lust was still not quenched.

"Let's do it again!" he yelled.

Again and again. To the morning light.

Kamishiro grabbed his cock with his large hand. Yuuki responded minutes later with a sopping wet emission.

See? This is how much I want you...

I came. I saw. I conquered. Kamishiro had uttered those words when he reached the summit of the mountain.

He came. He saw. He conquered. And now Yuuki wanted to experience that feeling for himself.

"Maybe we should take tomorrow off," Yuuki suggested lazily. Everything below his waist was still feeling deliciously numb.

"If you're really serious about climbing that mountain, you'd better shape up," Kamishiro advised.

"Huh?"

"Oh, nothing."

Yuuki merrily stole another kiss. It was going to be another late morning for both of them.

Afterword

A big hello to everyone! My name is Raica Sakuragi, and I'm deeply honored that you've read this novel.

This is my first *bunko* edition paperback for Prism Publishers, and actually the first bunko paperback I've ever written. A novella, to be more precise, a bit shorter than an "illustrated novel." I'm still amazed that I was able to pull it off.

This story takes place in the country, that wide world right outside the window. People are few and far between there. How does anyone get any work done in a place like that? On this stage splashed with local color, we have the story of a broken-down cook and a heartbroken café owner. Big bear meets long-haired *sasoi-uke*.

After seeing other illustrations by Katsumi Asanami, I fell in love on the spot. "I want her to draw my long-haired *uke*!" I thought. Those desires gave birth to luscious fruit, and I loved her initial sketches. This one? Or this one? Or this one? I practically swooned in agony, it was so hard to choose!

Asanami-sama, thank you from the bottom of my heart. Your delicious gift of the "Hey, grab me a towel!" sketch is greatly appreciated.

Speaking of delicious gifts, the subject of fine cuisine was only a small part of the story at first. I like to cook, but usually just make stuff that can be slapped together in a couple of minutes.

But halfway through my first draft, Kamishiro suddenly became a professional chef, and I couldn't really fake those types of recipes. After much agonizing, I finally appealed to a friend for help. My friend, who works as a chef, kindly created some recipes for me.

If you are interested in Fuuka's menu, please let me know, so I can send you recipes.

My friend also told me about the licenses needed to run a café. When he asked, "Does he have his chef's license?," I broke out in a cold sweat! But it turned out to be not that important.

The story begins at the end of summer and concludes the following winter. "Fuuka" can also be read "kazahana," a term for when the wind whips the snow into the air like flower petals. I'd be happy if this brings to mind the dancing white snow carried in by the wind from the frosty mountain peaks.

The long winter has already begun in Hokkaido. Though it looks very picturesque, it is a harsh time of the year for people living there.

Alas, I don't have a cook to whip up a warm meal to cure what ails me. My cats share their warmth as I contemplate the long winter nights to come. "Not again!" I sigh to myself. But don't worry that I'm about to drop dead under a snowdrift. Take this as proof that I'm alive and kicking!

My "Cat in my Lap" website:

<http://sakuragi.skr.jp/neko/>

Drop me a line and let me know how you're doing! Until we meet again—

December 2006

Raica Sakuragi

"There you go," he said gently.

Shin cracked open his eyes and crawled under the covers. Clutching the blankets around him, his breathing soon grew relaxed and even.

"Don't sleep with your stomach sticking out," Yuuki snorted. "G'night."

Shin was already fast asleep, but that didn't bother Yuuki. This dance would doubtlessly continue for some time to come.

Shin's passions simply weren't strong enough to overcome the taboos. And Yuuki wasn't brave enough to overcome the circumstances that had defined their lots in life. When fraternal love and erotic love were placed on the scales of life, it was clear which side would win.

But if their warm times together continued like this, so be it.

Yuuki picked up the hand cream and put it back in the hutch. Last year at this time, a collection of photographs adorned the shelves. But since Shin had started sleeping over, they reminded Yuuki too much of the photos that had been displayed at Tsukada's funeral.

As if to exorcise Tsukada's ghost, Yuuki had rid the house of every trace of him. Constant reminders were just way too painful.

He hated himself every time he felt Shin's eyes on him. Even though he tried to put it out of his mind, Yuuki knew that their relationship had slowly changed to something else. He felt guilty about so calmly discarding the past like a gust of wind blowing sand across a beach.

"Good night," he called out one more time.

closing the door behind him.

He made his way to his bedroom. When he woke up the next morning, Shin would again demand breakfast, and Yuuki would again be astounded at his ravenous appetite. The gentle curve of their emotions, shaken slightly, always returned to their same indifferent positions.

Each day no different than the last. Every day simply more of the same.